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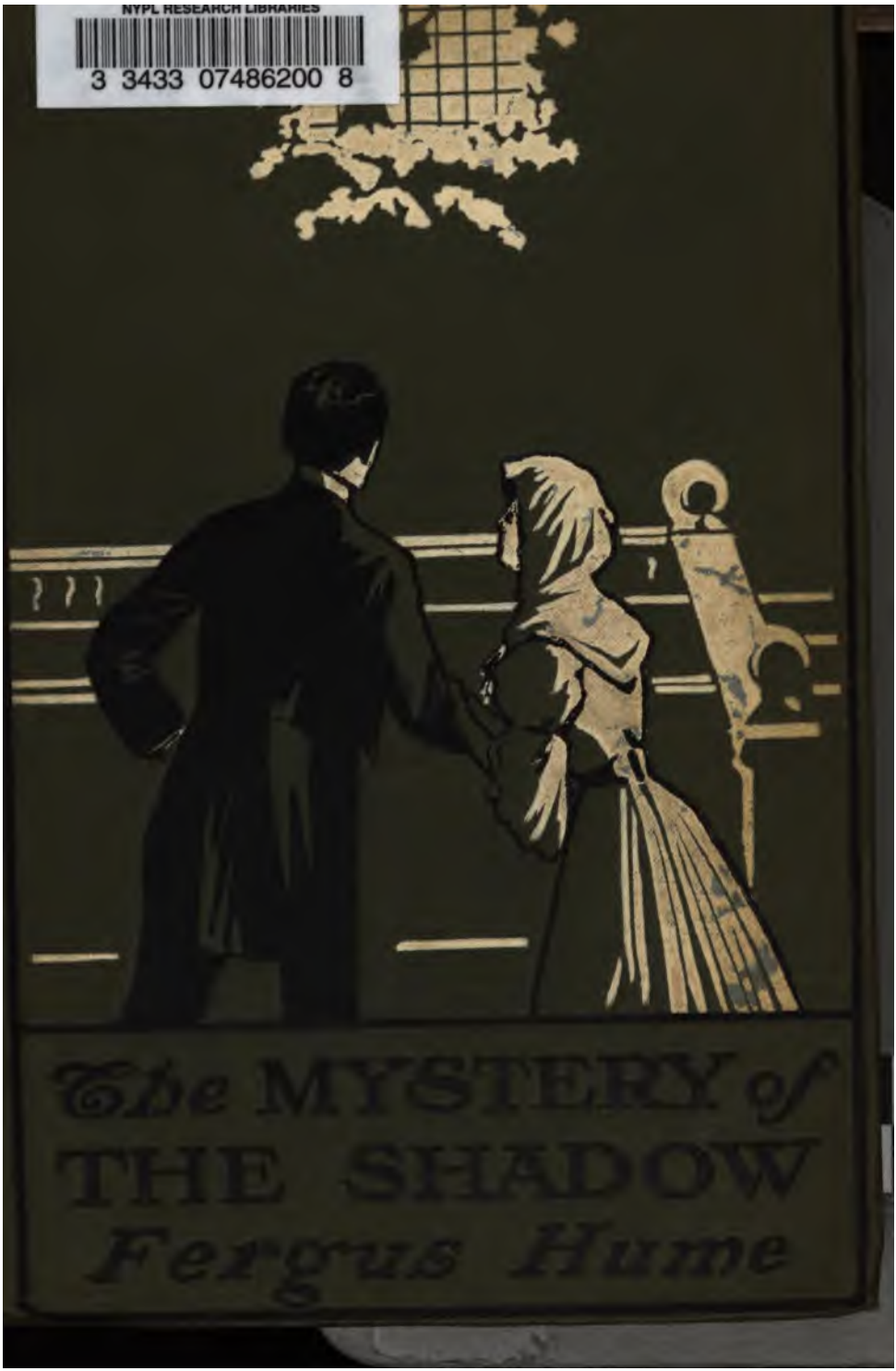

The MYSTERY of THE SHADOW

Fergus Hume

Hume

THE MYSTERY OF THE SHADOW

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"ONLY FOR A MOMENT DID THEY SEE THIS SHADOW" (*p. 23*).

THE MYSTERY OF THE SHADOW

BY

FERGUS HUME

Author of "The Mystery of a Hansom Cab" etc., etc.

AUTHORIZED EDITION

WITH SIXTEEN ILLUSTRATIONS BY A. T. SMITH

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ternally the marriage was a happy one, but Mrs. Ainsleigh knew better, although she never imparted her knowledge to the world at large. It was not her nature to accuse the stars of her own foolishness. But at this moment she was alone, and the mask of self-possession had slipped a trifle. Therefore did she look grimly at the worldly goods with which, reversing the marriage service, she had endowed her husband, thinking bitterly at the same time of the many sorrows he had brought upon her.

If gratitude counted for anything, Gilbert Ainsleigh should have devoted his life to the woman who had made that life so easy. His elderly wife had brought him the stately old Grange, old-world and luxurious: she had provided him with all the delights for which his very material nature longed: she had given him a fine position and an ample income. His return for these gifts was truly human. He pleased himself and neglected her. Truly Mrs. Ainsleigh had married in haste to repent at leisure: but no one ever heard her quote so appropriate a proverb. Yet the secret sorrow soured her kindly nature, and alone in the quaint old garden, amidst the blossoms of spring, she looked even older than she was, sadly faded and woefully disappointed. The fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, upon which she had lived for the last year, was indeed dust and ashes to the taste.

The grey, ivy-covered mansion had been a priory in the reign of that arch-iconoclast the eighth Henry. Having been given to a favourite courtier, the new owner had expelled the monks, and had founded a respectable county family. In spite of a curse said to have been pronounced by the last prior on those who dispossessed him and his, and a rumour that the said prior haunted

his late abode to see the fulfilment of the curse, the Blastornes had lived very comfortably, handing on the ecclesiastical house and income from father to son. Now the line was extinct, save for Miss Barbara Blastorne, and she had changed her name for that of Ainsleigh, only to learn that she had made a mistake. The lordly mansion with its oriel windows, its broad terraces, its delightful gardens, its fish-ponds and closely-clipped yew-tree walks, were all her own. But Barbara Ainsleigh would rather have dwelt in a hovel, where love existed, than in this fair domain where sorrow ruled. The gods had given her many desirable gifts, but the crowning one was withheld.

A light step warned her to resume her mask, and the face she turned towards the man who descended the shallow terrace steps was calm and impassive. Watching him approach, she might have been carved from stone for all the emotion she displayed. Had the newcomer been her husband she might have been more human: but her greeting to Harold Youle was that of a stranger, although she had known him all the thirty years of his life. And she now saw him for the first time this year.

"It is good of you to come," said Mrs. Ainsleigh, pointing to a seat, "as I have much to say to you. I hope you had a pleasant journey."

"It was dull, but short," replied Youle, in his level voice, which was almost as unemotional as her own. "It is good of you to have me down, Mrs. Ainsleigh."

"So Alix thinks. Have you seen her?"

"Fancy asking a lover so unnecessary a question. She came to meet me at the lodge, and we walked up the avenue together."

"Why did you not come sooner to tea," said Mrs.

Ainsleigh, handing him a cup, "and bring Alix with you."

Harold made a grimace.

"We met her father when we got inside," said he, shrugging. "Dr. Parsons has some new fad about living for one hundred years—as though anyone could put up with him for that time."

"You are not fond of him, Harold."

"He wearies me with his fancies. I wonder how so charming a girl as Alix came to have such a dull father. And I wonder still more that you keep him here."

"My health is none of the best," said Mrs. Ainsleigh indifferently, "and he really is a good doctor. Besides, Alix is my god-daughter, and I am as fond of her as you are."

"That is impossible," protested the lover. "I worship her. As to your health"—he ran his eyes over her—"you look very well."

"All the same, I suffer from heart-disease," she replied abruptly.

Youle looked shocked, and uttered all the sympathetic remarks he could think of on the spur of the moment. "You will live for many a long day yet, Mrs. Ainsleigh," he finished, "if you keep quiet and do not worry. Not that you ever do."

"Because I do not show it. But I have my troubles the same as other people. No one is spared worry."

"Ah! Even in this Paradise the serpent exists, then?"

"I admitted the serpent myself," said Mrs. Ainsleigh coldly. "He goes by the name of my husband."

"I am sorry——"

"Oh, spare me these banal regrets." She raised her hand impatiently. "What is the use of crying over

spilt milk. Gilbert is, what he is. I believe you know him?"

"In a general sort of way. Last time I was in England, some four years ago, I met him at dinner. He is a handsome man."

"A handsome scoundrel. Don't look shocked. I can say to you what I would not to anyone else."

"Surely. You have always been kind to me. When my parents died, ten years ago, you were a second mother to me."

"It would have been better had I adopted you, and made my will in your favour," said Mrs. Ainsleigh, looking round idly, "especially as you are to marry Alix. But I was a fool, and now I am paying for my folly. Have you seen Gilbert to-day?"

"You forget, I have just arrived."

"When you do see him you will be surprised at the alteration in his appearance."

"He was a handsome fellow."

"He is handsome still," said Mrs. Ainsleigh regretfully; "but he is sadly altered. What can you expect from a morphia-maniac?"

"What!"

"Don't look shocked," she said again. "I have known of his failing for the last six months. I asked you down to see if anything could be done. Gilbert is killing himself, and is killing me. I don't know what morphia does as a rule, Harold, but it has turned my husband into a devil."

"Oh, but surely——"

"Please, no." She flung up her hand once more. "When he comes out you can judge for yourself. And with my health, too," she went on almost to herself—"with my weak heart, it is killing me. Oh, and I loved

him so—I believe I love him still; yet he treats me cruelly. He neglects me, he squanders my money, he is abusive, and"—she hesitated, but the word had to come out—"and brutal."

Harold frowned.

"Do you mean to say that he has——"

"Not yet—not yet; but he will some day. And if he ever did strike me, I would die of shame and the shock." She clenched her fist, and her face grew peaked. "Yes, Harold; he is a slave to morphia, and my life is one long round of misery. Day after day he doses himself with that accursed drug. Even to-night, although you and Alix and her father are in the house, he will behave as usual, and go to the summer-house at the end of the Dutch garden to sleep off the effects of the morphia."

Harold looked distressed and angry.

"Why not insist that he should go to his room, where the servants will not see him."

"I have done so, but for some reason he prefers to sleep in the summer-house for a few hours after dinner. He comes back to the house about eleven, and I see nothing of him till he appears, haggard and worn out, the next morning. Oh, what a life—what a life!"

"Would you like me to speak to him?"

"What good would that do? These fools who take morphia heed no warning. Harold, I believe Gilbert hates me. Yet he once loved me."

"The drug, perhaps——"

"Yes, the drug—the accursed drug!" She moaned and hid her face. "But we can talk of this later. Meanwhile, here is Alix and her father." With an effort she again resumed her mask and laughed coldly, as though amused at some remark. "How ridiculous,

Harold!" she said, for the benefit of the approaching father and daughter.

"What is ridiculous?" asked Alix, taking a seat.

"Harold has been describing to me the manners and customs of some African natives," said Mrs. Ainsleigh promptly.

"On the Shiré River," added Youle, taking his cue.

"Tell me all about them."

Alix spoke with a pretty imperiousness which suited her very well, as she was but twenty-one years of age and extremely spoilt. Even Mrs. Ainsleigh, cold and self-contained as she was, could not resist the coaxing ways of her god-daughter. Yet she was not what would be called beautiful. Her charm lay in her manner and in the sweetness of her disposition. Other women who admired Youle wondered that a man who had seen the beauties of all nations should fall in love with what they termed a bread-and-butter miss. But Harold was very contented with his choice, and was as deeply in love as a reserved man well could be. All the same, he saw the faults of Alix, and did not spoil her, as others did. This she remarked upon frequently, and did so now, when he declined to describe the Shiré River natives.

"You never do anything I ask," said Alix, plaintively.

"Everybody else does, my dear," replied the young man, "and too much honey is not good for anyone."

"I am not so sure of that, Youle," remarked Dr. Parsons, who was stout and heavy. "According to the Greeks, oil without and honey within are necessary to health."

"Along with deep breathing," said Alix mischiev-

ously. She knew all about the latest fancy of her respected father.

"Quite so," he assented gravely. "You have never given your attention to breathing, Youle."

"I do so every moment I live," said Harold, smiling.

"Ah, but you breathe all wrong, as do the majority of people. Now I breathe deeply and so oxygenate the lungs. Observe." And Dr. Parsons began to heave up and down like a bellows. "I hope to live one hundred years on this system," he ended triumphantly.

"Life isn't worth living for a century," said Mrs. Ainsleigh bitterly.

"Oh, I think so, dear lady. Look what an object-lesson I can be to those who laugh at my theories! Tea? Well, I am not very sure if I ought to take tea —it is deleterious."

"Try a whisky and soda, papa."

"Poison! Simply poison!" exclaimed Parsons with horror. "One might as well exist on morphia."

Mrs. Ainsleigh glanced rapidly at Harold, and he gathered from her look that the doctor knew all about Gilbert's weakness. He began to see that Parsons was retained as a medical adviser at Tudor Grange less for the benefit of Mrs. Ainsleigh than for that of her husband. It was at this moment that the man himself arrived on the scene, stumbling down the terrace steps like one under the influence of drink.

"I say, Barbara, there's someone wants to see you," he giggled in a silly kind of way.

Harold was shocked at the change in the man's looks. Four years ago he had been a fresh-coloured, fair Saxon, athletic and breezy in his manner. Now his frame was bowed, his skin yellow, his blue eyes looked like those of a fish, and he had a loose mouth, the lips

of which were perpetually parted in a silly smile. Apparently the man's will and self-respect had been taken away by the drug. And yet Harold, always a close observer, thought he saw determination in those dull eyes, and a firmness about the chin which was belied by the foolish, gaping mouth.

Mrs. Ainsleigh cast a pained look on her husband and one at Youle, but spoke calmly enough.

"Who is it, Gilbert?"

"I don't know. He won't give his name," giggled Gilbert, taking a seat, into which he lurched heavily. "A sailor chap."

Mrs. Ainsleigh, always pale, became paler than ever, and her hands, usually firm, trembled visibly.

"A sailor?"

Gilbert shot a keen look at her, which did not suit with his ostentatious giggle.

"Yes, a sailor," he spluttered; "a rough, bearded man with a scar on his right temple."

Mrs. Ainsleigh gave a slight exclamation, and rose, trying to control her agitation with an obvious effort.

"I must see him," she said.

"Who is he?" asked Gilbert, and so sharply and imperiously that Youle started.

"I can't say yet," she replied coldly; "when I return I may be able to satisfy your curiosity." And she walked in her stately fashion across the lawn, disappearing through the window of the library, which was open. Gilbert's fishy eyes followed her, and there was an angry spark in their depths. He suddenly became aware that Youle was looking at him, and instantly the spark went out, and the lips again parted in a weak smile.

"Sorry I didn't see you before," he said, extending

a limp hand. "Youle, isn't it? Yes, of course. Met you four years ago."

Youle let the limp hand drop, after a careless shake.

"At Mrs. Brady's, the actress," said he soberly. "I remember!"

At the mention of the actress's name Gilbert straightened himself and darted an inquiring look at his guest.

"I remember also," he said, suddenly becoming bent again. "I haven't seen her since."

"Really!" Harold thought the speech was rather unnecessary, and examined Gilbert in his turn. But Ainsleigh, with the rudeness of a child, turned aside and bestowed his giggling attentions on Alix in a way which Youle disapproved of. Also he caught Dr. Parsons looking anxiously at their mutual host.

"Is he really ill?" asked Harold in a whisper.

"Oh, yes, the effects of a chill, and——"

"You can speak plainly, doctor. Mrs. Ainsleigh told me all."

"Indeed." Dr. Parsons moved uneasily. "Then you do not need me to explain."

It seemed to Youle that Parsons shirked talking about Gilbert, which was perhaps natural, since he was not aware how confidential Mrs. Ainsleigh had been. Harold was about to speak again, but changed his mind, thinking the less he said about the matter the better. Besides, Alix was growing restive under Ainsleigh's attentions, and Youle was virile enough to resent the same jealously.

"What nonsense you talk, Mr. Ainsleigh!" said Alix, shifting her chair impatiently; "I don't believe a word of it."

"But it's true."

"What is true?" asked Youle interposing, so as to attract the attention of his beloved to himself.

"That the ghost of the Prior haunts the Grange," said Gilbert.

"Pooh," said Youle sceptically; "ghosts went out with gas."

"They haven't gone out of the Grange, at all events, perhaps because we are lighted with electricity instead of gas. I swear that the monk in his robes haunts the house, and particularly the room where my wife prefers to sit in the evening."

"The drawing-room?"

"No. A small room." Gilbert pointed to a large window in the second storey towards the end of the terrace. "It's there, and is called the Prior's Parlour. Barbara likes it, although she's quite afraid of the ghost."

"So am I," shivered Alix; "don't talk about him."

"About 'It,' my dear Miss Parsons," said Ainsleigh maliciously. "'It' is a shadow, you know."

"And this is unhealthy talk," interposed Dr. Parsons quickly, his fat face uneasy and his limbs restless. "There are no such things as ghosts."

"Yet you met the Prior," snapped Gilbert, looking at him steadily.

"I certainly did see something queer in the picture gallery," hesitated Parsons. "But then, the shadows account for much."

"Well," said Harold scornfully, "I have travelled over most of the world, but I have never yet seen a ghost."

An interruption came. Down the steps hurried the butler, moving with less than his usual dignity.

"Sir," he said to Gilbert anxiously, "please come to my mistress. She has fainted."

"I thought she was interviewing someone," said Gilbert irritably.

"The gentleman has gone, sir, and my mistress is in a faint."

Harold saw a gleam in Ainsleigh's eyes, hinting at satisfaction, and was puzzled to know what it meant.

CHAPTER II.

THE SHADOW.

THAT same evening there were but three people to eat a well-cooked, excellently served dinner, for the guests had the table to themselves. Since the announcement by the butler that Mrs. Ainsleigh had fainted after the departure of the nautical stranger, Harold had not seen her. She recovered sufficiently to retire to her room, and refused admittance to everyone. Dr. Parsons, who offered his medical services, was kept out, and even Alix was put aside, much to her distress. Mrs. Ainsleigh also declined to see her husband, but Gilbert asserted himself and forced his way into the bedroom. For an hour he remained with his wife. What took place no one knew, but at the end of that time he went from the house, and left word with the butler that he had gone to London on business connected with Mrs. Ainsleigh's sudden indisposition.

"A most mysterious affair," said Youle to Alix, before they retired for the night. "What does it all mean?"

"I can't say," she replied candidly, and looking anxious. "It might be some trouble over money that this stranger came about. If so, Mrs. Ainsleigh has probably lost her temper with Mr. Ainsleigh."

"Oh, so you think that he has got into monetary difficulties?"

"He is never out of them, according to what Mrs.

Ainsleigh says," was the reply. "I wish she had never married. Good-night."

Harold would have asked more, but Alix, saying she was weary, in rather a petulant way, went up the stairs. In the smoking-room Youle attempted to question Dr. Parsons, but he flatly refused to talk about anything, alleging that, as Mrs. Ainsleigh's medical attendant, it would not be etiquette for him to chatter. Therefore Harold had to listen to a disquisition on the possibility of attaining to the age of one hundred years, while his brain was racking itself to find a meaning for the strange event which had happened since his arrival. But although he turned over the matter, not only before he retired, but after he was in bed, he could arrive at no conclusion. The solution suggested by Alix seemed to be the most probable.

"The stranger was some tradesman, or money-lender," thought Youle, "and Mrs. Ainsleigh having discovered some of Gilbert's trickery, has had a row with him. I dare say it will blow over, and he will return to cajole her."

He prophesied correctly. In a couple of days Gilbert, looking more haggard than ever, reappeared early in the morning and entered the breakfast room to greet his wife. On Monday he had gone away fuming with anger—this was the butler's account—and on Thursday he came smilingly to his wife's side. She looked at him furtively, and with a flush on her cheeks, but did not decline his kiss.

"Your trip to London has not done you any good," she observed, with a disparaging glance at his wan looks.

"I was worrying about you, dear," said Gilbert, with his usual silly giggle. "I should not have gone away angry."

"There was certainly no occasion that you should do so. But I do not think that this conversation is interesting to our guests. Will you not eat?"

Gilbert looked anxiously at the doctor and his daughter, also at Harold, and then made a pretence of eating. But he merely drank a cup of coffee and fiddled with a rasher of bacon. When the meal was ended he called Parsons into the library. Almost at the same time Alix went up to get her hat, as she was going for a walk with her lover. Harold thus found himself for the first time for three days alone with his hostess, and seized the opportunity.

"I wish you would tell me what is the matter?" said he.

"There is nothing the matter," replied Mrs. Ainsleigh. "Gilbert and I had a difference, and he went to London in a rage. Now he has come to his senses, and all will be well."

"He looks pretty bad."

"I expect he has been soaked in morphia ever since he went away," said Mrs. Ainsleigh scornfully; "but I can do nothing. Dr. Parsons may, as Gilbert has evidently taken him to the library to ask for medical treatment. Oh, what a life—what a life!" And she sighed wearily.

"I hope you did not get bad news when you fainted on the day of my arrival, after the departure of that sailor."

"Who told you he was a sailor?" asked Mrs. Ainsleigh sharply.

"I only guessed so from your husband's description."

"He described the man wrongly. Who my visitor was does not matter either to you or Gilbert."

be rather a shady individual, of whom his medical brethren fought shy. Several times he had set up in practice, but invariably had failed owing to his cranks and crazes. His present position exactly suited such a lazy man as he inherently was, as he had ample time to indulge in his fads, and very little work to do, for what Harold shrewdly suspected was a good income. Mrs. Ainsleigh was always a generous woman, and had something between eight and ten thousand a year, which she certainly did not hoard.

Several conversations took place between Alix and her lover, but no conclusion could be arrived at by Youle regarding the exact position of the ill-matched couple. Mrs. Ainsleigh held her tongue, as she invariably did, and Gilbert showed no signs of mending his ways. He was nearly always in a giggling, foolish state, or else as savage as a bear with a sore head; and Harold noticed that he acted in the way described by Mrs. Ainsleigh—that is, he would eat very little dinner, or at times not come to the table at all. Then he would dose himself with the drug, and sleep off the effects at the end of the garden in a quaint little summer-house shaped like a Chinese pagoda. Several times Youle had found him there stretched in the shadow, immediately in front of the door where the moonlight could fall on his face. He warned Ainsleigh of the bad effects of the moonlight on the facial muscles, but the man only sneered.

"I am all right, Youle. Don't you trouble your head about me. If you want something to do, hunt down the Prior's ghost."

It was Sunday when Ainsleigh said this, and immediately before dinner. Mrs. Ainsleigh did not like the usual supper prevalent in English families, and

insisted on having dinner at seven as usual. She shifted uneasily in her seat when Gilbert mentioned the ghost, and noticing this he talked about it all the time during dinner, to which they went almost immediately. Certainly the ghost had been unusually active, and Harold himself, sceptical as he was, had heard queer noises, for which he could not account. But then the house was very old, and was filled with wide passages and small rooms, and corkscrew staircases, and unexpected doors and windows. When the wind was high—and it had been for the last few days—it was no wonder that the ancient mansion was alive with noises. Harold put forward this theory, after Gilbert left the table, which he did in the middle of the dinner. Mrs. Ainsleigh answered.

"I wish the wind would blow Gilbert into the river," she said, seeing that the servants had left the dining-room for a moment. "He has gone away to dose himself as usual. He'll kill himself."

"My dear lady," protested Dr. Parsons, "not while I am here."

"Why can't you stop him?" she demanded fiercely.

The doctor shrugged his shoulders.

"He will have his own way, my dear lady, and——"

"Hush," said Mrs. Ainsleigh; "here is Thomson again."

Very little was said till the wine was on the table, and Mrs. Ainsleigh with Alix had retired to the Prior's Parlour, which was her favourite sitting-room. Then Harold addressed himself to the doctor very directly.

"Where is Ainsleigh?" he asked.

Parsons started.

"Probably already asleep in the pagoda," he said.

"I don't approve of his sleeping there, but you know his habits."

"But why does he sleep there?"

"I really can't say. These weak-willed people who cannot resist drugs and drink have odd fancies."

"Can't you cure the man, and give Mrs. Ainsleigh some pleasure in her life?" asked Harold almost fiercely.

"No. I wish I could. I have known Ainsleigh for many years, and he was a clever, bright young fellow. Now he is only thirty—your age, I believe, Mr. Youle—and see what a wreck he is."

"Do you think he will die?"

"Not while I can keep him alive," was Parsons' reply, made with unusual vehemence.

"I see. It pays you to keep him alive."

"I have my professional reputation to think about," said the doctor with great stiffness.

"Then I should let it slide in this instance, and let Ainsleigh go to kingdom come as soon as possible. He is of no use in this world, and only worries a wife that is much too good for him."

"He is your host," rebuked the doctor uneasily.

"And Mrs. Ainsleigh is my oldest friend," retorted Youle sharply. "I wish the man was dead with all my heart."

Parsons rose in a flustered manner. "I really cannot listen to this talk," he said, and bustled out of the room, like the sycophant and time-server he was.

Wondering how Alix ever came to have such a father, Harold finished his glass of port and went in search of the girl. On his way he stumbled against Gilbert, who was walking down the stairs. Youle buttonholed him.

"See here, Ainsleigh," said he determinedly, "I'm going to take Miss Parsons for a walk in the Dutch

garden, so you find some other berth to sleep in than the pagoda."

"My own place—shut up!" grumbled Gilbert thickly. And brushing Youle aside, he went heavily down the stairs.

Harold entered the parlour and found Mrs. Ainsleigh reading by the table near a large electric light shaded with red silk. Alix was leaning out of the window admiring the beauty of the night.

"Gilbert?" questioned Mrs. Ainsleigh, as he entered.

"He has gone into the garden, as usual," said Harold, whereupon the neglected wife shrugged her shoulders, and returned to her book. As she did not seem disposed for conversation, Youle drew Alix outside and challenged her to a game of billiards.

"I would rather walk in the garden," she said. "Besides, papa is trying some new stroke. Hark!" They heard the click of the billiard balls faintly. "I expect he'll go in for gambling next," ended Alix, who apparently had small regard for her eccentric parent.

"I think it will be best for me to marry you, and take you from him altogether," said Youle, as they emerged into the moonlight and strolled up and down the terrace.

"I wish you would. Why don't you?"

"Dearest, I have not sufficient money."

"What about those precious stones you brought back from Africa?"

"Oh, that scheme is knocked on the head. I saw the jewellers about them, and while admitting that the stone is of the order of gems, and is quite unknown, they hold out no hope that it will become popular."

"What a shame! I think it is a pretty stone myself. I have got on the necklace you gave me. Where is the ring you had made of that large stone?"

Harold glanced at his hand.

"Ainsleigh took a fancy to it, and I gave it to him."

"I thought you and Mr. Ainsleigh were not friends?"

"I am friendly with him for his wife's sake," explained Harold; "but don't let us talk of disagreeable things, dearest. This is the kind of night that Romeo and Juliet loved. Let us walk and talk as they did."

"They didn't walk," contradicted Alix, laughing. "Juliet was on a balcony, and Romeo climbed over the wall."

"To find his heart."

"And where would you look for yours, Harold?"

"In your pocket."

"I don't carry it in so stuffy a place. Do you hide mine in your ticket-pocket?"

"No, I carry it in my breast."

"That's where I carry yours. What queer anatomy, and what nonsense we are talking! See, how lovely it is on the lawn. I'll race you." And before Youle could say a word, Alix had started off, light-footed as Atalanta. He followed fleetly, but could not catch her. She made much to his annoyance, for the Dutch garden, a queer, quaint, prim place towards the far end of the grounds. After flitting, laughing and singing, through many alleys, Alix emerged on a wide, peaceful lawn, at the far end of which was the pagoda-shaped summer-house. Harold came up and drew her away.

"I wish you hadn't come here," he said sternly. "You know——"

"Yes, there he is," said Alix with a shudder, and peered into the summer-house. Ainsleigh had drawn a form across the door, and was stretched thereon in a sound sleep, his head resting on his arm, and with a cloak thrown over his evening dress. His face was up-

turned, and stray pencils of moonlight rested on its haggardness. He looked very white and lean and wrinkled, and in the thin moonlight his appearance asleep was uncanny, so suggestive was it of death. After a glance of disgust Harold drew Alix away, impatiently.

"Leave him alone. It is not a sight for you," said he.

"Pooh! I am a doctor's daughter, and my nerves are strong."

Harold contradicted this, and Alix argued. But he managed to get her up to the house, through the quaint alleys, which resembled narrow passages. When they reached the lawn before the house, a cloud passed over the face of the moon, and all the lights in the windows shone out still brighter for the moment. Alix cast her eyes up towards the casement—as it really was—of the Prior's Parlour.

"I wonder if Mrs. Ainsleigh is still there," she said. "If she is—Oh!—Harold—what's that?"

The two were standing immediately below the terrace, gazing up towards the white space of the blind which concealed the room. The light, faintly reddish—no doubt from the lamp-shade—made the blind one broad shimmering lake of light. But as Alix gasped, a shadow passed before their eyes. It was that of a monk, if one could judge from the hooded head, and from the outstretched hands, which held a rather large cross. Only for a moment did they see this shadow, and then a corner of the blind was drawn aside and a white face peered out. The two watchers could not see what the face looked like, for almost at once the blind was dropped, and the shadow disappeared from the blind.

"The ghost—the ghost!" wailed Alix, shivering with excusable fear of the unseen.

"Rubbish!" said Harold, who had not lost his nerve at this uncanny sight. "It's someone masquerading, and—great heavens!"

He might well make the exclamation. A wild, shrill cry rose within the room, and across the lighted space of the window reeled two figures struggling violently. One was that of a woman, the other that of the monk. The hood had fallen off, and the two saw a round, clipped head. To and fro swayed the figures, and Alix moaned to see that the shadow monk's hands were gripping the shadowy Mrs. Ainsleigh. For the moment Harold stood aghast at the sight of this tragedy, enacted so near at hand, and then sprang on to the terrace. He found the door locked.

"Climb the ivy," shrieked Alix, scrambling up the steps. "Oh, climb quick! She will be killed! Help, help!"

Her voice rose wildly in the still air, but above it sounded a terrible screech, then a long wail of agony, both of which came from the room where Mrs. Ainsleigh was being done to death by this horrible shadow. Youle never gave himself time to think. He sprang on to the tough roots of the ivy and swung himself up hand over hand with the dexterity of a sailor. The shadows had disappeared, but shut out from all seeing by the blind, he still heard the sound of the struggle and the noise of overturning furniture. The window was locked. He muffled his hand in his handkerchief and broke the glass. In a moment he had the catch in his hand, and the casement, which was double-valved, flew open. Breaking through the blind, the horrified man dashed into the room. Mrs. Ainsleigh was lying

"BREAKING THROUGH THE BLIND, THE HORRIFIED MAN DASHED INTO THE ROOM" (p. 24).

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on the floor dead—strangled. Through the door was retreating a tall man dressed in monkish weeds. He gave a low laugh as Youle sprang into the room, and passed through the door. Harold flung himself forward, only to have the door shut in his face as his fingers touched it.

CHAPTER III.

HUNTING A GHOST.

HAROLD did not pause to look after the murdered woman, since such attention would avail little for one who had passed beyond human aid. His predominant idea was to capture the assassin, who had so cleverly slipped through the door. Even as Youle laid his fingers on the handle, he heard the sharp click of the turning key, and, although he wrenched violently at the door, it would not open. And as the creature on the other side laughed softly, the clock on the mantelpiece chimed half-past nine. Even in that moment of excitement Harold mechanically noted the hour, and rapidly reflected that here, at least, was the time of the crime precisely fixed.

What could he do? After a final effort to open the door, Youle dashed back to the window, and slipped out of it, alighting swiftly amongst an excited crowd of grooms, stablemen, and indoor servants who were gathered round Alix. She was explaining as well as she could, but in her alarm bungled the story in the telling. All that those around her could gather was that Mrs. Ainsleigh was being done to death by a ghost—by *the* ghost—the ghost of the dead Prior who was said to haunt the house, and especially that parlour wherein Mrs. Ainsleigh sat every evening. The very mention of the spectre made all who listened, quail. Had they not been told by their fathers and mothers about the

"ALTHOUGH HE WRENCHED VIOLENTLY AT THE DOOR IT WOULD NOT OPEN" (*p. 26*).

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haunted Grange, and had not several seen the flutter of monkish robes in the twilight? Absurd as it may seem, not one of those men but hesitated to climb into the room where the ghost might be. And into this startled group dropped Youle.

"Follow me!" he gasped, dashing through the crowd, and, since the library door which opened on to the terrace was locked, he ran round to the front entrance, followed by the amazed men. The women stopped behind, with Alix in their midst.

Into the entrance hall sped the young man, who raced up the wide staircase. On the landing he stumbled over a page-boy who was descending, and flung him out of the way. In another moment he was before the parlour door. It was still locked, but the key was there. Youle opened the door, and there saw the parlour, with the furniture in disorder, and near the overturned table the body of Mrs. Ainsleigh, with her hands gripping the loose edges of the Persian praying-mat. The crowd of men at the back of Harold blocked the entrance and peered past him at the sight of their dead mistress lying, still and gruesome, in the red light which filtered through the lamp shade. And even as they looked, the wind, which had ceased for a few minutes, rose in a wild moan, as though the spirit of the dead was lamenting for the violent loss of its body. Some of the younger servants drew back.

"The ghost! the ghost!" they murmured.

Youle turned on them furiously. "You fools!" he cried, stamping his foot. "Why do you talk rubbish? There are no such things as ghosts."

"Miss Parsons said——" began the shaking butler.

"Pah! What matter what she said, unstrung and unnerved as she is. I am ashamed of you, Thomson.

A man of your sense and years should be wiser than to believe nonsense. Mrs. Ainsleigh has been murdered, and by a man masquerading in a monk's dress."

"The Prior——"

"Flesh and blood, you ass. Can a ghost strangle a human being? Here, get out of the way. Call up Dr. Parsons; he is in the billiard room. Come and search for the assassin. He is in——"

"What is the matter—what is the matter?" demanded the heavy voice of Parsons, and he bustled through the crowd round the door. Youle wheeled to face him, and noticed that his face looked drawn and white.

"Mrs. Ainsleigh has been murdered."

"Murdered! Great heavens!" The doctor hesitated, then came forward. "I see—strangled." He knelt beside the body and placed his hand over the heart. "Not a sign of life," he murmured; "she is dead. Who killed her, Youle?" he demanded, looking up, with a face now positively ghastly in its pallor.

"I'm going to find out," said Harold abruptly, and pushed out of the door. In the corridor he met Alix hurrying towards the parlour, and panting with terror and haste.

"Oh, what has happened—what has——"

"Go back, dear," said Harold kindly; "this is no sight for your eyes."

"Mrs. Ainsleigh. Is she—is she——"

"Yes—quite dead!"

At this moment the doctor stepped out of the room, and Alix hurried towards him with outstretched arms.

"Is she dead?" was her cry. "Oh, father, is she——"

Then suddenly she seemed to see something in her

father's face which startled her, for, with a sudden jerk, she evaded his embrace, and flew along the corridor in the direction of her own room. Parsons staggered against the wall, and placed his hand on his heart, apparently trying to control himself. Youle, who had scarcely recovered his wits, so sudden and terrible had been the catastrophe, looked at his intended father-in-law suspiciously. Why had Alix fled? What had she seen in her father's face?

"Where have you been just now?" asked Youle sharply.

"In the billiard room. I went there after dinner and have been knocking the balls about," said Parsons glibly, although the perspiration was standing on his high, bald forehead. "I heard the sound of running feet and Alix shrieking. Poor Mrs. Ainsleigh—oh, my dear friend! Why do we stand here, doing nothing?" he demanded, with a weak attempt at anger. "Who killed her?"

"You asked that before," said Youle curtly. "I told you that I was going to find out. Thomson"—he turned to the stout butler, who had also emerged from the parlour—"send someone down to the village for the constable. Doctor, you stop beside the body."

"No! I can do nothing; I am not fit," stammered the medical man, recoiling.

Youle laughed shortly. "You should be used to dead bodies by this time. Thomson, clear all the men out of the parlour. Tuckle"—Harold stretched out his hand and collared the small page over whom he had stumbled at the head of the stairs—"you go in and watch."

"Yes, sir," said Tuckle, with ghoulish delight, and darted into the room. Youle frowned at the boy's

pleasure, which was horrible and unnatural. Then a sudden thought struck him, and he walked again into the parlour, to find Tuckle bending over the body of his mistress.

"You were at the head of the stairs when I came up," he said, seizing the lad by the shoulders and turning him sharply round. "You must have seen the man leave this room?"

"What man?" asked Tuckle, forgetting his manners in his interest.

"The man who killed Mrs. Ainsleigh. He was dressed as a monk. He came out of this room over ten minutes ago." Harold glanced at the clock as he spoke, and saw that the long hand now pointed twenty minutes to ten. And the half-hour, he remembered, had chimed just as he laid his hand on the locked door.

"I didn't see anyone, sir."

"Yet the door of the parlour is visible from the stair-head?"

"I was coming along the other corridor from the back of the house, and never thought of looking in this direction," said Tuckle. "I didn't see no one, I didn't."

"What were you doing upstairs at this time?"

"I came to get a cigar-holder for Dr. Parsons. It was in his bedroom."

"Oh!" Harold recalled the look of Alix and his own sudden suspicion of the doctor's behaviour. "And where was Dr. Parsons?"

"In the billiard-room, sir."

"When did you come up?"

"About twenty minutes ago, sir. He rang the bell and I went to the billiard-room. Then he asked me to get his cigar-holder from his bedroom. I ran up by

the front stairs, and couldn't find it for a bit. Then you come up, sir, and knocked me over!"

"The corridors are lighted by electricity. You must have seen the man coming out of this room," insisted Harold, nonplussed.

"No, sir," rejoined Tuckle in an injured tone. "I didn't think of looking. If I'd seen anyone coming out, I'd have asked his business."

"Even had it been the ghost?" inquired Youle sarcastically.

Tuckle grinned all over his pasty-white face, and a derisive look came into his shrewd grey eyes. "I don't believe there ain't no such thing as them," said he contemptuously. "I heard them"—he jerked his head towards the corridor where the scared servants still lingered—"I heard them say as the ghost did for missus, but I don't believe—oh, no, not much. Gummy——"

"Hold your tongue, Tuckle. Tell me. Did you hear any noise?"

"No, sir. I was at the back, in Dr. Parsons's room."

"When you came up for the cigar-holder did you meet anyone?"

"No, sir."

"And you saw nothing."

"No, sir."

Tuckle leered as he spoke, and although Harold could not think that the boy was deceiving him, yet the sight of the grin made him break out into a rage. His nerves were quivering like aspens.

"You young devil," he said, giving the boy a shake; "if you're playing the fool with me, I'll thrash the life out of you."

Tuckle whimpered. "Lor, sir, whatever do you mean? I can't say I saw what I didn't see."

"No." Harold released his hold, feeling convinced that the boy was ignorant. "Remain here till the constable comes, and don't touch the body."

Tuckle seated himself in a chair, and nodded; so Harold left him in that weird room, the reddish hue of which seemed to be in keeping with the crime. Looking back at the door, Youle saw that the boy, with his hands between his knees, was bending forward to look at the dead woman. And on his wizen face was a grin of delight. He had half a mind to turn the boy out and send one of the other servants; but he knew that they were all country-bred and superstitious, whereas Tuckle, coming from the slums of London, was matter-of-fact and shrewd in spite of his mere fifteen years. Moreover, too much time had been lost already in not searching the house, and Youle regretted bitterly he had not ordered a search to be made at once. But no man, however clear-headed, could have regained his faculties at once after the excitement of the past half-hour.

Of course, the whole house was in commotion. Frightened female servants were loitering about the corridors and clustering in groups to discuss the crime. Harold looked on this disorder with displeasure, and, coming on Parsons at the foot of the great stairs, he told him to send them all to the kitchen. Thomson had already dispatched a groom to the village for the constable, and until he arrived, nothing much could be done. It was at this juncture that Alix returned from her room.

"I felt faint," she explained to Harold, and he noticed that her face was pale and her eyes remarkably bright; "so I went to take a dose of red lavender. I am all right now. What can I do?"

"Take the female servants to the kitchen," said

Youle promptly, "and keep them there. Doctor, come with me, and get the men. We must hunt the house."

"For the ghost?" asked Alix.

"For the assassin," said Youle testily. "My dear child, how can you be so foolish?"

"We saw the hooded head," she protested, with a shiver.

"Oh, I grant that someone was masquerading, probably knowing that such a dress would enable him to escape questioning by these fools of servants. But ghosts cannot strangle, Alix, and ghosts cannot cast shadows, so——"

"Then, who killed Mrs. Ainsleigh?" she asked suddenly and abruptly.

"I can't say. Go, my dear girl, and make these women obey you."

"We ought to seek Mr. Ainsleigh," said Parsons, who was now quite composed, and who had evidently recovered from his fright.

"He's in the pagoda," said Youle shortly. "We'll go there at once and then search the house. This masquerading assassin must be here, as he cannot have left the house in those robes."

Parsons nodded, and the two men went into the garden. In the summer-house they found Gilbert asleep, as Alix and Harold had left him, stretched out on the form, with his head resting on his arm. The younger man shook him roughly.

"Ainsleigh, wake up," he shouted in a brusque manner. "Your wife——"

"Hullo!" murmured Gilbert lazily, and opened his eyes with an effort; "what's the matter? My wife—my——" His voice died away, and he again closed his eyes, breathing heavily.

CHAPTER IV.

WHAT MRS. ALLISON SAW.

WHEN Gilbert recovered his senses and was informed of the terrible event which had taken place while he was unconscious, his distress was painful to witness. Harold told him the truth bluntly enough about midnight, and in the parlour where the crime had taken place. By this time the police had arrived, and the body had been taken to the bedroom. Alix and her father were there with some of the women, and the village constable was making inquiries amongst the other servants in the kitchen. Thus Harold and his host were alone in the parlour, and Gilbert was sobbing like a child. It was rather surprising that the scamp should thus lament his elderly wife, seeing how badly he had treated her; but Youle fancied that the tears were those of remorse, and thought the better of the man for shedding the same.

"I'll never forgive myself—never," lamented Gilbert, who was huddled up on the sofa in a heap. "If I'd only kept straight this night, I'd have stopped with Barbara here, and then she would not have been murdered."

"It is too late to think of that, Ainsleigh. All you can do is to find out who killed her, and punish the man."

"I can do more," said Ainsleigh in a low voice. "I can overcome my weakness. Oh, what a fool I have

been!" He rose and began to pace the room in an agitated manner. "Barbara was a good wife to me, and we would have been happy, but that I gave way to that infernal morphia."

"Why did you, then?"

"Because I was a fool," retorted the other passionately. "I knew nothing about morphia when I married Barbara a year ago. But I had a touch of sciatica, and Parsons gave me morphia to relieve the pain. I took to the drug with delight, as many another person has done, and so everything went wrong. Ah, these doctors, they have much to answer for!"

"Don't blame Parsons for your own weakness, Ainsleigh."

"No, I suppose I should not, and yet, had he not given me the taste for the drug, all would have been well. Barbara would at least have been alive. But I swear"—he dropped theatrically on his knees—"that I'll never, never touch morphia again."

"Don't swear an oath you may not be able to keep," said Youle drily, for he had not much faith in Ainsleigh's professions.

The man leaped to his feet and pressed his hands together passionately. "I mean to keep it," he declared earnestly. "I will never, never put that drug to my lips again."

"It will be a struggle, Ainsleigh."

"It will be hell," said Gilbert between his teeth. "You don't know, Youle, what morphia means to those who take it. Drink—pah! that is nothing! It is easier to leave off strong drink than drugs. But I owe something to Barbara, seeing that my weakness has indirectly brought about her death. I'll conquer—I'll conquer. Barbara shall not have died in vain. Youle"—

he held out his hand entreatingly—"say that you believe in my determination."

Harold clasped the extended hand at once. Since the damage was done, and out of evil good was likely to come, he could not coldly refuse to encourage the man. "Yes, I believe you will succeed." He looked at Ainsleigh's firm jaw. "The wonder to me is that a fellow so determined as yourself ever gave way to such a weakness."

Ainsleigh cast a lightning glance at him, and then lowered his eyes.

"There is a joint in every armour," he said listlessly, for the effects of the drug had not quite worn off, and he alternated between agitation and indifference. "But never again—oh, never again. Poor Barbara! Youle, I have not been a good husband."

Harold knew that well enough from the few conversations he had had with the dead woman, but he did not feel inclined at the moment to discuss Ainsleigh's marital shortcomings.

"We can talk of that later," said he, abruptly. "Meanwhile, what's to be done towards securing the assassin?"

Ainsleigh spread out his hands with a despairing gesture. "Can we do anything more than we are doing?" he inquired; then passed his hand across his lined forehead. "I don't feel myself yet," he murmured; "my wits won't work. If I can only sleep for a few hours, then I may be able to form some plan. What is being done now, exactly?"

"The women are laying out the body," said Youle quickly, "and Dr. Parsons is assisting them. The policeman Wiggins from the village is making inquiries. Also, he has sent to Helstone for the inspector

of the district. To-morrow we can examine into the matter."

"And meantime the murderer will have time to escape," said Gilbert irritably.

Youle shrugged his shoulders. "I fancy he is far away by this time, Ainsleigh. By locking the door, he gave himself time to escape, and, though I was in the house by the front door within ten minutes after the crime was committed, yet I could see nothing of him. He must have known the house well, to have got away so speedily."

"It is not an easy house to know," said Ainsleigh. "The man must have been in it before, if he knew all the twistings and turnings of the place."

"Yes, that is probable. Also he must have known of the legend of the Prior's ghost, and possibly your wife's dread of it."

"Barbara was foolishly superstitious," said Ainsleigh half angrily; then, recollecting that the woman was dead, he softened his voice. "Poor soul! her nerves were not in good order, and I was partly to blame for that, seeing how she worried over my folly." And he covered his face with his hands, sobbing bitterly.

Youle was glad to see that the man was so remorseful, for he would not have given him credit for such a display of emotion.

"Don't worry over things any more, Ainsleigh," said he impulsively. "What you must do is to find out who is the assassin."

Gilbert dashed the tears from his eyes and straightened his figure in a manly way. "I'll go up to-morrow morning after I have seen the inspector," he said; "yes, to London, and there I'll find the best detective procurable. All that money can do to avenge the death of

my poor wife will be done. Youle, can you not guess who killed her?"

Harold shook his head. "No, although that letter may throw some light on the subject. It talks of threats on the part of a man called Orlando. Do you know anyone of that name?"

"I do not." Gilbert pondered. "I wonder if Orlando is the first name of that sailor who called the other day."

"Did your wife say nothing?"

"Nothing. I went to her room the next morning, and found that she was still suffering from the effects of the interview. She fainted, as you remember, after the man left. She refused to explain everything, and we quarrelled over the matter. Then I went to town, as things were so unpleasant."

"Did she say anything to you about the man?" asked Youle.

"She did not; not even that her visitor was a sailor."

"But it appears clear to me, Ainsleigh, that inquiries should be made as to the whereabouts of the man, and he should be made to state what he said to your poor wife likely to cause her to faint. And if his name proves to be Orlando, why, then——"

"Why, then, if we go by the letter, he threatened to kill her."

"Not necessarily. He may have threatened in another way."

Ainsleigh's face took on a determined expression quite at variance with its usual inanity. "We can only judge by what we know," he said quickly. "From the few words left by Barbara we know that this man threatened her. Now she is dead. He killed her."

"I don't agree with you, Ainsleigh. We must give him the benefit of the doubt; and, indeed, we do not know if the letter was written to the sailor, or even if he was a sailor."

Gilbert did not reply, but shook his head and went out pondering. After a few minutes spent in weeping beside his dead wife, he retired to bed in a weak and tearful state of mind. Next morning, however, he was better, and, although he apparently suffered from not taking his matutinal dose of the drug, yet his wits were alert, and he was firmly bent upon discovering the villain who had killed Mrs. Ainsleigh.

At the outset this appeared as hopeless as searching for a needle in a haystack. Inspector Unwin, of Helstone, a neighbouring town some five miles away, duly arrived with several underlings, and got to work at once. But in spite of all possible questions being asked, and a minute search being made both within and without the Grange, nothing could be discovered likely to lead to the detection of the criminal. The wretch had stolen into the house in some mysterious way, had executed his dastardly crime, and had departed equally mysteriously and expeditiously. How he had entered, and how he had escaped, could not be found out. And the odd thing was, that although a good number of villagers were about on the previous night between seven and ten—during which hours the crime had been committed—yet no one had set eyes on any stranger. Out of the night the man had come; into the night he had gone, and that was all that could be discovered.

"It's the hardest crime I ever tackled," said the inspector, much vexed, for he found himself, so to speak, before a brick wall over which he was unable to climb. His wits were not equal to the emergency, so he very

"Some in the kitchen, one in the parlour, and two at the front door."

"Why don't some of them walk about the park?"

"I'll see to that after you have gone, sir."

"Humph!" Gilbert was apparently irritated by the oversight. "You should have set them to watch the park gates. Are you sure that none of them are about?"

"They are placed where I stated, Mr. Ainsleigh," said the inspector stiffly. "I hope I know my business, sir."

"I never said you didn't," replied Ainsleigh rudely. "I'm going up to town now, and will bring back your friend Sparrow to-morrow at noon. I can't get down earlier, as I have to see my lawyer."

He nodded and went out, leaving Unwin rather ruffled. Harold apologised.

"You must excuse Mr. Ainsleigh, Inspector. He is not well."

"So Dr. Parsons told me," said Unwin drily.

Youle guessed that the doctor had been indiscreet. "He should not have done that," said he quickly.

"You mean he should not have told me about Mr. Ainsleigh's drug-taking," said Unwin easily. "Oh, that's all right, sir. I had to learn what Mr. Ainsleigh was doing about the time the crime was committed, and asked him. He told me himself that he had been lying in a drugged sleep in the summer-house, and called upon Dr. Parsons to confirm his story. I know that Mr. Ainsleigh has left off the morphia, so I make every allowance for his being irritable."

They heard the brougham which was taking Ainsleigh to the station drive away. He had to go to Helstone, five miles distant, as the village of Blastorne —it took its name from the family—was an isolated

hamlet in a little known corner of Kent. The inhabitants were Saxons of the time of Ivanhoe, and were as ignorant of the doings of the world as though they lived in the wilds of Africa. The railway touched at Helstone, and evaded Blastorne, so the village resembled a sleepy backwater of the great river of life, and the people who resided in the neighbourhood were as cows in a meadow, but scarcely so useful. It was small wonder that everyone was excited at the murder of so great a personage as Mrs. Ainsleigh, *née* Miss Barbara Blastorne.

Harold and the inspector talked for quite two hours after Gilbert left to catch the ten o'clock train, but although they discussed the case in all its bearings, they rose from their conference as wise as when they had sat down. Youle yawned and suggested bed, for the strain was telling even on his tried nerves. Just as he did so the door was opened violently, and Thomson the butler entered with less than his usual stateliness, dragging a stout, hysterical woman by the hand, as though she were a naughty child.

"Mrs. Allison, the lodge-keeper, sir," said he, greatly excited. "She says that she's seen It!"

"Seen what?" demanded the inspector sharply.

"The ghost! the ghost!" cried Mrs. Allison, flopping into a chair. "I saw the ghost as killed my dear lady at the lodge gates ten minutes ago. Oh, look for it! I saw—I saw——" Then she gave a screech and fainted.

Harold and Unwin waited to hear no more, but rushed out.

CHAPTER V.

A DISCOVERY.

NEEDLESS to say, neither Inspector Unwin nor Youle found any trace of the supposed ghost seen by Mrs. Allison. They searched in the vicinity of the lodge, and ultimately the whole park surrounding the Grange, but without success. An examination of the woman only resulted in a repetition of her extraordinary story.

"I was taking in my washing, it being late, gentlemen," said Mrs. Allison, quite flustered, "and I saw it coming down the avenue, eight feet high and dressed in petticoats, as you might say. I just gave one screech and ran into the house, where I shut the door and fainted. Oh!" she turned pale again at the memory of the experience. "I've seen a ghost—give me something pious to read."

"Rubbish!" said Unwin sharply; "there are no such things as ghosts."

"Oh, ain't there," almost shouted the woman; "as if I hadn't heard that story of the old Prior being seen about the Grange whenever misfortune came to the Blastornes. My mother told it to me heaps and heaps of times, and now I've seen it. And say what you like," added Mrs. Allison obstinately, "the ghost killed old Madam."

"Nothing of the sort, Mrs.——"

"What! Ain't I heard what Thomson have to say, and what everyone's talking about? Why, you, sir," she

appealed to Harold, "you saw that old Prior killing Madam."

"I saw the shadow of someone masquerading as a monk," replied Youle dryly. "I quite believe you saw the Prior, but——"

"There ain't no 'buts,'" said the woman energetically; "see him I did!"

"You saw someone masquerading as the Prior, and that someone killed Mrs. Ainsleigh. Did you see the face?"

"Me?" screeched Mrs. Allison; "why, I was lying in a faint with my head amongst the fire-irons. I see it a-coming eight feet high and——" Here Mrs. Allison told her story again, being very badly shaken.

"What do you make of it all?" asked Youle, when the lodge-keeper had been dismissed.

Unwin pinched his chin. "Oh, the case is clear enough. You say that the late Mrs. Ainsleigh suffered from heart disease?"

"So she told me, shortly before her death."

"And she believed in this absurd legend of the Prior?"

"I understand that she did. And all the servants do, together with the villagers."

"Do you believe in ghosts, Mr. Youle?"

"No, I don't," replied Harold decisively. "I have been all over the world, and I have seen no spectre. But in these country places old superstitions cling to the people. Nearly all the servants are born and bred on the Blastorne estates, and know the legend as well as they know the scandal of the village."

"Humph!" The inspector again pinched his chin. "It's a made-up thing."

"What do you mean?"

"Mrs. Ainsleigh suffered from heart disease, and believed in this legend," explained Unwin; "therefore, if anyone masqueraded as the Prior and came upon her suddenly, it was to be expected that the shock would kill her."

"But it didn't. If Miss Parsons and I can believe from the shadow on the blind, the figure assuredly came into the parlour where Mrs. Ainsleigh was sitting, and which it was supposed to haunt. But she rose and struggled with it, and then——"

"And then it strangled her," ended Unwin; "merely a variation of the original intention, Mr. Youle. Someone for some reason desired to kill Mrs. Ainsleigh, and masqueraded as the ghost so as to give her diseased heart the necessary shock to finish her. But in spite of her reported belief in the apparition, she apparently did not faint or die, but flung herself on the masquerader. Then he strangled her, as the shortest way out of the difficulty. A clever man, whomsoever he may be," added the inspector, "seeing how he escaped you, by locking the door."

"The library door, which leads out on to the terrace, was locked also, Unwin. When Miss Parsons and myself went out for our stroll it was open."

"Then you think that the assassin closed that door?"

"Who else could have done so? He might have closed the front door also, for all I know."

"But you entered by that way."

"I entered by the window at first. It was only after the assassin escaped me that I slipped down and made for the front door. It was certainly open, but then by that time the servants had gathered, and may have opened the front door. But at the time the crime took

place the terrace door was certainly locked. I tried it, and failing to gain admission, I climbed up to the window by the ivy, as Miss Parsons suggested."

"Queer," soliloquised the inspector. "The person who perpetrated the crime must know the house extremely well."

Youle assented with alacrity. "I think so, else how could he have escaped so easily? Certainly, all the servants were out of doors on the terrace with Miss Parsons, and the assassin had time to conceal himself in the house until such time as he could escape."

"But if the alarm was given——"

"It was, but everyone was too upset to watch at every entrance. This is a rambling old place, and there may be all kinds of secret exits and entrances. Besides, the constable did not arrive for at least half an hour. Ample time was given to the man to escape. All I can say is, that the assassin must have known the house extremely well, and that he knows the legend. Failing his attempt to bring about the death of Mrs. Ainsleigh from a shock to her weak heart, he killed her."

"But his object?" asked the inspector.

Youle shrugged his shoulders. "I can't say. The reason may be found in Mrs. Ainsleigh's past life. It is in that direction that you must make inquiries, Unwin."

"There is that letter, of course, Mr. Youle."

"I have been thinking over that, Unwin, and frankly speaking, I do not believe that it refers to the criminal."

"But the hinted threat?"

"Probably was some trivial one. Mrs. Ainsleigh would scarcely begin a letter 'My dear Orlando' to one who designed her death."

"No! No, and yet——" Unwin stopped and rubbed his forehead vexedly. "I really must confess that I see no light," said he. "Everyone in the house can account for his or her doings at the time. The sailor who called has not been seen in the village lately, and the letter—you say—means nothing. What's to be done?"

"Nothing that I can see. Wait till the inquest takes place."

This seemed good advice to Unwin, so he went to bed. The case was beyond him, although he was by no means a dull man. The next day he made a thorough search through the house, but could find no secret passage such as Youle conjectured might exist. Unless the whole building was pulled down, any such—if it existed—could not be discovered. The inspector also questioned Thomson, who had been in Mrs. Ainsleigh's service since he was a boy, but the butler could explain nothing. He had never heard of any secret passage: nor did he know of anything in the past life of his mistress which would result in her death by violence. The housekeeper—also an old servant—made the same statement, and in Mrs. Ainsleigh's desk were no papers, other than the unfinished letter, likely to throw light on the subject. The affair was truly a very profound mystery.

The inquest was to take place the next afternoon, when Gilbert arrived. He returned not only with the detective Sparrow, recommended by Unwin, but with the family lawyer, Mr. Quail. This latter was a staid, respectable old gentleman, who had been a life-long friend of the deceased lady, and was much shocked to hear of her violent death.

"I assure you, Mr. Youle, she was a most estimable

woman," he said to the explorer, "and so far as I know, had not an enemy."

"So far as you know," echoed Harold; "then she might have had one."

"We all have," replied the old lawyer sententiously; "however well-meaning a person may be, there is always someone who feels aggrieved. Yet I cannot think of anyone who hated Mrs. Ainsleigh sufficiently to bring about her death."

"I don't think it was intentional—at all events, at first," explained Youle; and then told Quail what the inspector had said as to Mrs. Ainsleigh being frightened to death by working on the superstitious side of her nature. "But as her heart proved to be stronger than the assassin thought," said Youle, "there was nothing left for him but to murder her."

"But his reason?" asked Quail doubtfully.

"If you as her lawyer, and knowing her secrets, cannot tell, how can you expect me to know, Mr. Quail?"

"My late respected client had no secrets," said Quail indignantly; "a most estimable lady she was, Mr. Youle, and charitable to the poor!"

"She was all that was good and kind," assented Youle readily. "All the same, there may have been something in her life which she wished to conceal, and which brought about her death. There was the visit of the sailor, for instance. She refused to explain that, even to her husband."

"Who was the sailor?" asked the lawyer.

Youle told him, and showed him the unfinished letter. Quail professed his inability to understand the matter, although he tried to explain.

"Probably this sailor was one of those poor people

whom Mrs. Ainsleigh assisted out of charity. She was a very kind-hearted woman, and did much good of which she said nothing."

"Do you know the name Orlando?"

"No; I never heard it. Nor did I know that she was acquainted with any sailor. The thing is a mystery to me, Mr. Youle."

"And to everyone," replied Harold, who was at his wits' end. During the time which had elapsed since the death, every inquiry had been made, but a deep darkness still brooded over the identity of the assassin, over his motive for committing the crime, and over the way in which he had managed to escape.

Nor did the inquest forward matters in any degree. The district coroner selected a jury from the farmers and tenants of the Ainsleigh property, and the body was inspected. Youle gave evidence as to what he had seen, and the same was corroborated by Alix. Dr. Parsons deposed as to examining the body, and stated the cause of death. The country doctor who had been called in made the same statement. Then Unwin detailed all that he had learned, and mentioned the legend. It might have been expected that commonsense men would scout the idea of the ghost; but the jury, all being slow-thinking people, who lived in the neighbourhood, and were well acquainted with the Blastorne legend, did nothing of the sort. All Unwin's scepticism and the coroner's scorn could not shake the jury's belief that the Prior *did* walk, and *did* appear, when misfortune threatened the old family. All the same, the jury quite saw that the legend had been made use of by the assassin to bring about Mrs. Ainsleigh's death from sudden shock, and admitted that, failing this result, the woman had been strangled. It was suggested by an intelligent

farmer that the assassin must have known of the legend, of the fact that Mrs. Ainsleigh suffered from heart disease; and also he must have been well acquainted with the topography of the Grange to escape so readily. Yet, with all this, no one could think who had killed the woman.

Gilbert Ainsleigh, who looked much better, and who was visibly affected when he gave his evidence, came in for much sympathy. Mrs. Ainsleigh had always kept her troubles to herself, and no one save Youle knew what anxiety her husband had caused her. There were certainly rumours that Gilbert did something queer, but when he faced the jury, looking pale and subdued, and fairly well in his deep mourning, no one believed but that he was an estimable young man bitterly afflicted because of his wife's death. Moreover, his good looks told in his favour.

There was a great deal of discussion over the inquest, and many things were said as to how the crime might be cleared up. But the coroner, who had great commonsense, pointed out that there was absolutely no evidence to identify the assassin. Everyone in the house at the time the crime was committed could prove an *alibi*, and there was no evidence before the jury likely to implicate any outside person. Under these circumstances the coroner advised that an open verdict should be given, which was accordingly done. "Wilful murder against some person or persons unknown" was the determination of the jury, and then the meeting broke up, everyone being more or less puzzled by the whole inexplicable affair.

The detective Sparrow, who was a sharp-looking little man, not unlike the bird he was named after, listened very attentively to all that was said by those who

gave evidence. Then, without saying a word to anyone, he left the house, and began to make inquiries about the neighbourhood. Gilbert missed him, but did not go in search of him. In fact, he could not do so, as he was busy arranging for the burial of his wife, which was to take place the next day. When Mrs. Ainsleigh was safely bestowed in the Blastorne vault, Mr. Quail intimated that he would read the will of the deceased lady.

"A mere matter of form, I suppose," said Youle to his host. "I expect your wife has left everything to you."

To Youle's surprise Ainsleigh seemed by no means sure. "Barbara was very bitter against me at the last," he said gloomily; "and, if you remember, we quarrelled over the secret she was keeping from me about that sailor. It is just as likely as not that she has revenged herself for my sharp words by leaving the money away from me."

"But Quail never came down between the time the sailor called and your wife's death," argued Youle. "She certainly did not alter her will then, and I presume it was made by her, after your marriage, in your favour."

"She said something about it," replied Gilbert carelessly; "but she was an odd woman, and might just as well have changed her mind early as late. Besides, Youle, I certainly behaved badly."

"Don't say anything more on that point, Ainsleigh. If you made mistakes, you are now sorry, and no one can do more than repent. But I do not think Mrs. Ainsleigh would leave you a pauper because of your weakness."

Gilbert still shook his head. "Quail will tell me nothing," he said, "but I should not be surprised to hear

that I was left out of the will. Barbara was jealous, you know."

"Had she any cause to be?"

"No. All the same, she fancied she had. But we'll hear the will to-morrow, and then I'll know the best or the worst. Hullo, here's Sparrow with a bundle. What have you got there, Sparrow?"

The little detective hopped into the room like a bird. He was undersized and lean, and dried-up in looks, not unlike Tuckle the page, who was likewise of the Cockney species at its worst. Sparrow wiped his sharp little face and plumped the bundle down on the table.

"I've been asking the lodge-keeper about that apparition," said he; "she declares it was eight feet high. That is ridiculous, as she was probably deceived by the twilight and her own fears."

"Then you think what she saw was a real person?" asked Ainsleigh.

"I know it was, sir; and, moreover, she saw the assassin."

"How can you be sure of that?" demanded Youle sceptically.

Sparrow laid his hand on the bundle. "I made inquiries," he said, "and then I searched. No one could have left the park in that dress without being spotted, so the chances were that the dress was hidden in the park. I hunted round, and finally I picked up this bundle, which was concealed in the fork of a tree some distance above the ground."

With this introduction Sparrow opened the brown paper parcel. There Gilbert and Youle beheld a monk's dress of white serge, much soiled. Only the hood was lacking: that had been torn off.

CHAPTER VI.

THE WILL.

"WHAT do you think of it all, Mr. Youle?"

It was Dr. Parsons who was making this inquiry. The funeral of the late mistress of the Grange had taken place, and the mourners had returned to the house. Quail had arranged to read the will within an hour, and the drawing-room was chosen as the place where it would be read. Gilbert, who had exhibited much grief at the funeral, had retired to his study. Harold thought that in his despair he might again take to morphia, and was about to follow him to his retreat when he was stopped by the doctor in the hall.

The man looked decidedly ill. As a rule, he was a stout, red-faced, well-preserved man of over fifty; but now his figure seemed to have shrunk, and his cheeks hung flabby. Even his ruddy colour had departed, and his skin looked yellow, and much more wrinkled than usual. Also his dress was untidy. Youle would have thought the man had been drinking but that he knew intemperance was not a vice of the doctor's. But he guessed that the cause of this changed appearance was a selfish grief lest he should be forced to depart from the flesh-pots of Egypt now that his patroness was dead.

"What do you think of it all, Mr. Youle?" he reiterated, while Harold was examining the outward appearance of his questioner.

Youle sauntered to a side bench which was near the door, and sat down. "I can only spare you a few minutes, Doctor," he said, glancing at his watch. "I wish to go to Ainsleigh. He is so down in the mouth that I fear lest he should take to that drug again."

"He might—he might," murmured Parsons, fiddling with his slack mouth. "He is not a man likely to deny himself anything which would make his life easier. But," he asked the question for the third time, "what do you think of it all?"

"Are you talking of the murder?"

"Not exactly. I don't believe anything will ever be discovered, Mr. Youle. Inspector Unwin, who seems to be a zealous and clever officer, can learn nothing, and, as we know, the police of Helstone have practically given up the case. There is that detective, of course. But beyond finding that robe he has made no progress."

"The finding of the robe is most important," said Youle drily, "as we now know that the assassin remained in the house for more than four-and-twenty hours after the crime was discovered. Sparrow, who seems sharp enough, may hit on the trail yet."

"I wish he would," cried the doctor, the veins in his bald forehead swelling and his face becoming purple. "I hope he'll catch the man and hang him—hang him for ruining my life."

"What do you mean by that exactly?" asked Youle quietly.

"Mean?" Parsons wiped his bald head and spoke with great excitement. "Surely you can see—surely you can understand. I am to be your father-in-law, if you truly love Alix!"

"Of course I do. There is no question of that."

"Well, then, can you stand by and see me ruined?"

"Ruined!" Youle raised his eyebrows.

"Of course—of course," said Parsons testily. "I gave up my practice in Kensington to come here and be the private medical attendant of Mrs. Ainsleigh. She is dead, and I am again thrown on the world."

"Perhaps the will makes some provision for you."

"No. There is no reason why Mrs. Ainsleigh should leave me anything beyond an annuity, seeing that I gave up my practice at her request. But she might intimate in her will that Ainsleigh should look after me. Yes, she certainly might do that. And Ainsleigh promised several times to see that I did not lose in the event of Mrs. Ainsleigh's death. Of course, he will get the property."

"Of course, since, so far as I know, there are no relatives."

"Are you sure of that?" asked Parsons quickly.

"Quite sure. Mrs. Ainsleigh, whom I knew for many years, was the last of the Blastornes."

"Yes, quite so. Still, I heard her talk of some relative."

Youle sat up quickly. "The deuce you did. When?"

"Oh, several times. You see, Youle, she was open with me about her husband, as I knew of his failing, and, really, it was as much on his account that I was here as on Mrs. Ainsleigh's. The poor lady was very angry with her husband, who certainly did behave badly."

"He could not help his failing."

"Mrs. Ainsleigh thought that he could, and once or twice she said that she would leave the money away from him to some relative."

Harold thought of Gilbert's doubts, and wondered if he would be left a pauper after all. "Did Mrs. Ainsleigh ever mention the relative's name, Parsons?"

"Well, what she said was this," explained the doctor. "One day a few months ago she was angry with Ainsleigh, who had been unusually trying with his way of sleeping in the pagoda, to which Mrs. Ainsleigh—and very rightly—objected, on account of the servants. Ainsleigh had words with her, and walked out. She called me in to give her something, as her heart was beating so fast, and she felt faint. Then she said these words"—Parsons paused to give effect to what he was about to say—"'Don't let Gilbert be too sure he will reap his reward for tricking me into marriage. There is always Orlando.'"

Youle jumped up and gave vent to his feelings in Hindustani, aloud and shamelessly. He always did swear in Hindustani—Tamil for choice—when he was astonished.

"Orlando," he repeated. "That's the name in the unfinished letter. And threats—humph!—a relative." He thought swiftly for one minute, then faced round on Parsons. "Why didn't you say this at the inquest?" he demanded.

"What was the use?" grumbled Parsons. "I know no more than the few words Mrs. Ainsleigh spoke, which I have repeated. You don't suppose this Orlando relative killed her."

"I don't know what to think," muttered Youle, with his eye on the chequered pavement of the hall. And, truly, he did not. The explanation of the doctor had imported a new element into what was already a sufficiently complicated case. Orlando—whatever his other name might be—had uttered threats; Orlando was a relation; Orlando, according to the few words dropped by the dead woman, might inherit. These things were strange, and opened up theories.

"But we'll wait till the will is read," decided Youle aloud, and Parsons overheard him.

"What about me?" he demanded, with the egotism of the selfish.

"Wait till the will is read," said Youle impatiently. "If Ainsleigh inherits, as he probably will, your future is all right. If Orlando, whosoever he is, gets the money, we'll have to learn what he thinks of the unfinished letter. You're all right."

"It is not myself that I am thinking of," explained Parsons elaborately, "but Alix."

This was a patent lie, but Youle feigned to take it for gospel truth.

"You needn't bother about Alix," he said abruptly. "I'll marry her whenever she likes."

"But I may not like," quavered Parsons unsteadily. He did not care to stand up to the young man, being somewhat afraid of his virility.

"What do you mean by that?" snapped out Harold, surprised. It was the first time that the doctor had given any intimation that he disapproved of the engagement.

"Alix is a beautiful girl," said the anxious father, "and I look upon her as one likely to make a good match."

Youle stared at him with a scornful face. "You need have no fear, Doctor," said he contemptuously; "I'll see that you have enough to live on."

"But I don't mean——"

"I know what you mean. We'll talk of this later. Whether Ainsleigh looks after you or not, I'll see that you have enough to live on. I am not rich, but Alix is worth spending money on, by pensioning you."

"You insult me," stuttered Parsons.

Youle shrugged his shoulders and went towards Ainsleigh's study. On the way he met Alix, who had her hat on. She drew him aside. "Come into the garden," she said quickly. "I wish to get a breath of fresh air. What have you been saying to papa? He looks quite angry."

"We have been talking about you," said Youle, hesitating at the door of the study. He did not know whether to go in, or depart with Alix. Ultimately love carried the day, and he went out with her through the library on to the terrace. Gilbert could wait, thought the lover, and, if he did choose to take the drug just then, he would not be in a fit state to hear the will. Knowing how anxious Ainsleigh was to hear about his future, Youle thought that he would keep his head clear until Quail read the legal document. Therefore Harold accompanied Alix with a quiet mind, and answered her questions guardedly. He did not wish to give her a bad opinion of her father.

"We'll have to go in a short time," said Alix, as the two passed down the steps and across the lawn towards a garden seat under a sycamore. "Why did you talk about me, Harold?"

"It's a pleasant subject," he said with a smile.

"Not when papa discusses it," said Alix, flushing. "He looks upon me as something saleable, Harold. I know quite well that he has been trying to break our engagement."

"Humph!" said Youle, glancing swiftly at her. Some such thought had crossed his own mind. "Has he ever said as much to you?"

"He has hinted several times that I could do better than marry you, Harold. You see, papa has no money, and now that Mrs. Ainsleigh is dead, his position will

not be pleasant. He has no practice to go back to, small as was the one he had in Kensington. He has no money, and unless Mrs. Ainsleigh has remembered him in her will, I really don't know what he will do."

"I see. And therefore he proposes that you should marry a rich man, in order to supply him with an income."

"Yes, that is exactly his idea, although he has not told me so in as many words."

"I thought as much, and hinted as much. Well, my dear one, you need have no fear. I am not wealthy, but I can allow your father at least two hundred a year, and on that he can live while we marry."

"He may not think that enough, Harold."

"Oh, I daresay he will consider it poverty. But it is not what he thinks, Alix, but what you determine. While Mrs. Ainsleigh was alive I thought it best that you should remain with her. Now I think we ought to marry as soon as I return from South America."

"Are you really going there, dear?"

"Yes; you see, there is a chance of my getting money out of a silver mine in Bolivia. I have not enough money to keep you in the position to which you are accustomed."

"Oh, I am used to very little. Don't go, Harold." She placed her arms round his neck, and leaned her head on his shoulder. "Stop here and marry me at once. Now that Mrs. Ainsleigh is dead, I'll be miserable if I go away with papa. He is very kind, but"—she hesitated, then came out with what she meant to say—"I have no respect for him."

"Dear"—Harold stroked her hair—"your father is well enough as men go, and he certainly might be worse.

I would like to stop and marry you at once, but I am not rich enough to do so."

"We could live on very little."

"I have no idea of grubbing, or of seeing my wife lack those things she ought to have. No, my darling, this mine is very rich, and in a year or two I'll be worth a lot of money. Then I can return and make you my wife. I have no fear but what you will be true."

"Of course. I love you with all my heart," she said vehemently, "and whatever papa may say, I'll never think of anyone else. But I am afraid that when you go away, something may come between us."

"Another man?" questioned Youle, jealously.

"Oh, no—how can you think so? But one never knows what will happen. Of course, we'll always be true to one another. Still—Harold, Harold, I feel that if you go, something will part us."

"My dear," he took her hands, and holding them between his own, looked into her brown eyes, "you must not be fanciful. I love you and you love me, so nothing can possibly come between us. I have arranged to go to America about this mine, and go I must, within the month."

"That is only ten days," mourned Alix. "Darling," she added coaxingly, "marry me, and I'll come also."

Youle laughed, and strained her to his breast. "Don't tempt me, my dearest girl," said he earnestly; "you could not bear the hardships. Only wait for a year, and then I'll come back to make you my wife."

"You said two years," she whispered, with fear in her eyes.

"I'll try and make it one," he replied softly, "and before I go, I'll see that you and your father have enough to live on."

Gilbert alone said nothing. His face was perfectly white, and he passed his tongue over a pair of dry lips before he could speak. Then he laughed harshly.

"You see, Youle," said he, trying to be calm, "I was right about my wife. She has left me a pauper."

"Mr. Ainsleigh," began Alix, "let me——"

"No," he said, and went to the door of the room, "don't speak to me. You schemed for the money: you have got it. Ten thousand a year—ah, and I have —nothing—nothing. You adventuress!"

"Don't! Harold!" cried Alix, suddenly.

The young man, his eyes blazing with anger, sprang forward to answer the insults of the disinherited husband. Alix hung round his neck, and prevented him assaulting Ainsleigh. Gilbert, with his face white and drawn, stood at the door, looking not at Alix, but at the doctor.

"Was it for this that you murdered my wife?" he said, and left the room, shaking and ghastly.

"'WAS IT FOR THIS THAT YOU MURDERED MY WIFE?'" (*p. 66*).

CHAPTER VII.

THE PAGE-BOY.

WHEN Gilbert left the room, after hurling his furious accusation at Parsons, there was an astonished silence for quite a minute. Alix was the first to recover presence of mind, and sprang to her feet indignantly.

"How dare Mr. Ainsleigh say that father killed his wife!" she demanded, with an angry flush. "Everyone knows that father was in the billiard-room at the time. Mr. Quail—Harold, surely you do not for one moment believe in this monstrous accusation?"

"I do not believe it, for one," said Youle, promptly; and, indeed, it was ridiculous that the doctor should be so crudely accused.

"Nor I," chimed in Quail, in his dry way, as he put away the will. "Mr. Ainsleigh is naturally annoyed at being cut off without even the proverbial shilling, so it is natural that he should accuse wildly anyone who benefits."

"Then why not accuse me?" demanded Alix, still indignant. "I am the one who takes the money. As to my father——"

"He can defend himself," interrupted Parsons sharply. "I have refrained hitherto from offering any remark." He rose and straightened his somewhat bent form, and his face became more resolute in its expression. "I do not understand why Mr. Ainsleigh should bring so terrible an accusation against me," he said

deliberately. "We have always been good friends, and it was Mr. Ainsleigh who procured me the appointment of medical man to his late wife. To accuse me of killing the lady who afforded me the means of living is absurd. I was ignorant, as was Alix, that Mrs. Ainsleigh had left the money to her. I challenge Mr. Ainsleigh to make good his accusation."

"There is no need," said a quiet voice at the door, and Gilbert, looking pale and subdued, entered the room. Apparently he had quite recovered from the fit of ungovernable rage which had made him talk so wildly.

"I spoke in haste, Parsons," he remarked, advancing towards the doctor, "and under the mortification of losing what is rightfully my own. Of course, you had nothing to do with my wife's death, and I apologise fully. Will you not take my hand?"

"Willingly," said the doctor, extending his own, which was firmly grasped. "I know you could not substantiate your mad words. And," added the doctor generously, "although I am sorry that you should have doubted me even for a moment, yet I forgive you fully and freely."

"And on my part," said Alix, who seemed to approve of Gilbert's recantation, "since Mrs. Ainsleigh left me everything, I am quite willing to make any arrangement you choose."

"You mean to allow Mr. Ainsleigh an income?" said Quail, nodding.

"It is only right," replied the girl quietly. "I have inherited ten thousand a year and this house. Whatever Mr. Ainsleigh's faults may have been, he certainly ought to benefit. Harold, will you suggest what sum I should give to Mr. Ainsleigh?"

"You must decide that as you think," replied Youle frankly, "and as your father approves."

"I suggest that Mr. Quail should arbitrate," said the doctor quickly.

Gilbert, who was now perfectly composed, looked from one to another with a faint smile.

"There is no need for anyone to arbitrate," said he quietly. "When we were married, my wife settled on me an income of five hundred a year. I presume, since I behaved so badly, she thought I was not worthy of more at her death. I thank you, Miss Parsons, for your generous offer, but I refuse to accept one penny. And, Youle," he added, turning to the young man, "do you remember how I said that my wife would probably leave me penniless? I don't exactly mean that," he continued, "since at our marriage she gave me enough money to live on with due economy. But, I mean, you remember that I told you how Barbara would probably disinherit me."

Youle nodded. "I remember," said he, "and I am very sorry——"

Ainsleigh waved his hand. "There is no need for sorrow," said he. "I have reaped what I have sown. All we have to do is to look at things as they are. My wife is dead and buried, and Miss Parsons"—he bowed to Alix—"is now the mistress of the Grange. I shall leave here to-morrow, and take up my abode in London."

"But you will come here again, I hope?" demanded Alix impulsively.

Ainsleigh looked at her so directly that she flushed, and her eyes fell.

"I shall come, if you ask me," he said, and departed. Harold noted with some uneasiness that his last look was at Alix.

Quail nodded as the door closed for the second time on Gilbert.

"He has taken it very well," he declared approvingly; "very well indeed. Few people would have borne the loss of a large income so well."

"I agree with you," said Youle warmly, although that last look at Alix still lingered uncomfortably in his mind. "There is much good in Ainsleigh."

"Alas!" Parsons shook his head. "The good that is in him is being slowly destroyed by that fatal drug."

"He has given that up for ever," observed Harold quickly.

"It is not so easy to give up, Mr. Youle."

"I grant you that. But Ainsleigh is a much stronger man than we think. He has been a slave to morphia, but he will be one no longer. Upon my word, I admire the chap," he ended emphatically.

All this time Alix had said nothing. After that intense look from Gilbert she had moved to the window, and now stood looking out at the garden, so fair in its robe of delicate spring green. Suddenly, and while Quail and her father walked towards the door, she spoke loudly.

"I don't think I shall accept this money," she declared; then, seeing them pause with astonishment, she continued: "I have no right to Mrs. Ainsleigh's money. I am not a relative, and her husband ought to have the money; so you see——"

"I see nothing," cried the doctor aggressively. "What are you thinking of, my child? Providence pours wealth into your lap, by which you can make my old age comfortable, and you would reject it?"

"Your old age," said Alix, looking at him with some-

thing like scorn. "Ah, you think only of yourself, and——" Here she became aware that her feelings were hurrying her into saying too much, and checked her tongue with an effort of control rare in so young a girl. "I mean that one must be just," she ended quietly.

"To yourself," said Parsons violently, "to me."

"To Mr. Ainsleigh, father. At least let him take half the money."

"Five thousand a year! Are you mad, child?"

"I am just, father."

Harold interposed to end this disagreeable scene, as he was disgusted at the egotism of Parsons, and filled with admiration at the determination of Alix to act with strict honour.

"You forget, dear," he said gently, "that Mr. Ainsleigh has rejected any offer of money. I think you can enjoy your good fortune without any qualms of conscience."

"Certainly, certainly," said Quail. "Let things stand as they are, my fair young client. Mr. Ainsleigh will leave here to-morrow, and then you will see the advisability of settling down and carrying on the late Mrs. Ainsleigh's good works."

"I shall certainly do that," said Alix emphatically; "and I also intend to offer a reward in order to solve the mystery of her death."

"I approve of that—I approve of that," cried the doctor bluffly. "We must do all we can with our money. Quail"—he turned to the lawyer, quite prepared to act as the master of a house which did not belong to him—"make yourself at home, I beg. It is the time for my breathing exercise, and even good fortune must not be allowed to interfere with the well-being of the body." After which speech he fussed out

of the room, leaving a disagreeable mpression behind. Mr. Quail, after a glance at the annoyed look of Alix, followed, with a shrug of his legal shoulders. Harold and his beloved were left alone in the splendid room.

"My father seems to think that he is master here," said Alix, turning to Harold with a faint smile; "but he is wrong. I am master and mistress both."

Youle stared at her with some astonishment. It seemed strange of Alix to assert herself so firmly, when hitherto she had given in to her father in every way. The girl saw his amazement in his eyes.

"You think that I am weak," she said quietly; "in that you are quite wrong. Hitherto, because I was dependent on my father, I have not asserted myself."

"And towards me?" blurted out Youle.

She smiled expressively. "There is no assertion possible in love, my dear. I love you and look upon you as my master, as a husband should be. Besides, you are just and honourable, and do not expect a woman to be a slave."

"I certainly do not," said Youle slowly, and marvelling, as well he might, at this sudden change.

"And," she continued, "you must see, as I do, that my father is weak. No man worthy of manhood would have given up his practice to be at the beck and call of anyone, even of Mrs. Ainsleigh, kind as she was. I believe in a man being independent and fearing no one; but my father is full of fears and of fancies. We must excuse his shortcomings, as he was born weak. But I am firm, and I know my own mind. Now I have money, and I can assert myself; therefore my father shall no longer be allowed by me to dictate in any way. He shall stay here, and have what money he wants; but I

shall not allow him to take any part in the conduct of the house. And when we marry, Harold, my father must go away. We can allow him an income, and——"

"*You* can," said Youle sharply. "I have very little money; but I hope to have more when——"

"Ah!" She wreathed her arms round his neck. "You will not go now to South America in search of that silver mine. I am rich."

"I am not the man to live on my wife's money," said Youle stiffly.

"Who knows that better than I? Yet, since I have come unexpectedly into a large income, why not marry me at once and take your place as the master of the Grange?"

Harold put her decidedly from him. "No, darling heart. You are all that is good and kind," he said calmly; "but I want your respect as well as your love. You talk about a man being independent. I cannot be that if I become your husband on my present income. I shall go away and make my fortune. When I return in a year—for in a year, after all, I shall come back—then we can marry without loss of self-respect on either side."

"But I wish it," cried Alix anxiously.

Harold looked at her very directly. "My dear," he said, with a quiet laugh, "I am not your father."

Alix knew that Youle was her master, and did not fight further—at least, on the old ground. Still, she tried a woman's wiles.

"If you go away," she said, "something will prevent our marriage."

"That is impossible," said Youle firmly. "You no longer need be coerced by your father, seeing that you are over age and rich."

"But the look that Mr. Ainsleigh gave me," she muttered.

"I'll break Ainsleigh's head if he dares to look at you again in that manner," cried Youle furiously, and the cave-man's nature came to the surface. "Let him leave you alone, that is all I ask. You are not afraid of him?"

"No; certainly not. I fear no one."

"And," he hesitated, "you are not in love with him?"

"That question is rather insulting, Harold."

"Well, it is. But you must forgive my jealousy."

"Then why go away and leave me exposed to——"

"Because I love you so much that I trust you wholly," he broke out impetuously. "My dear, you remain here and enjoy yourself on this money. I'll go away for twelve months, and then will return to marry you. Meantime, I am quite sure that you can hold your own against your father and Ainsleigh. I want my future wife to be strong."

"And therefore you put her to the test," said Alix, smiling faintly. "Well, let it be so. But I feel—I feel"—she put her hand to her head—"that something will come between us. I know not what, and yet—and yet—— Oh, how I wish you would stay!"

"No," said Youle. And, looking at his firm face, she decided that nothing, not even the love of woman, would move this man when he had made up his mind as he had done in this case.

The discussion was interrupted by the sudden entrance of Tuckle without knocking. The boy looked more wizen and pasty-faced than ever, and there were signs that he had been crying, although he was not a lad given to tears. He made straight for Alix, and

clutched her dress. Harold caught him by the scruff of the neck and swung him clear of the girl.

"What do you mean?" demanded the young man sternly. "You entered without knocking. Do you forget what you are?"

Tuckle howled. "I'm a miserable cove," said the boy, putting his knuckles into his red-rimmed eyes. "I've heard as she"—he pointed a grimy finger at Alix—"is the new mistress, and I want to stop on, I do."

"Then stop on," said Alix smiling. "No one wants you to go, Tuckle."

"He does," bellowed the boy. "Mr. Ainsleigh does. 'Cause he took me from mother, who used to wallop me down Whitechapel way, he says as I ought to go with him to London. And I don't want to." He broke out crying afresh. "I've a good 'ome here, and grub, and company, and I don't want to go back to London, I don't. Mr. Ainsleigh's a hard cove, he is, and clips me over the head proper, he do."

"Does Mr. Ainsleigh want you to go with him?"

"Yus—as his servant, when he's got one already, and a beast he is—that Derry, who calls hisself a valley, which he ain't."

"You would rather stay here?"

"Lor, miss, in course I would, and be a good boy and learn from the parson, as says I'm sharp," said Tuckle glibly.

"Then you shall stay," said Alix, smiling. "That is, if you are a good boy and behave yourself. But here is Mr. Ainsleigh."

"Come to collar me," sobbed Tuckle, slipping behind his mistress as Gilbert entered the room.

"Mr. Ainsleigh," said Alix gently, "Tuckle wants to stop at the Grange."

"He's an ungrateful young whelp," said Gilbert, his fresh-coloured face looking gloomy. "I picked him up in London for my wife to try her hand on, as he was a street arab of the worst."

"I wasn't," yelped Tuckle.

"You were. I'll clout you over the head if you contradict. Your mother is one of the most notorious drunkards in London."

"Takes five police to git her to the station," said Tuckle proudly.

"Hold your tongue. I promised Barbara always to look after the boy, and I want to take him away with me. Under Derry he'll have to mind his manners."

"Let him stop on here," said Alix urgently. "Since Mrs. Ainsleigh took an interest in him, I'll see that he is brought up properly."

"You'll have trouble with him, Miss Parsons. He is the son of a drunkard and a thief."

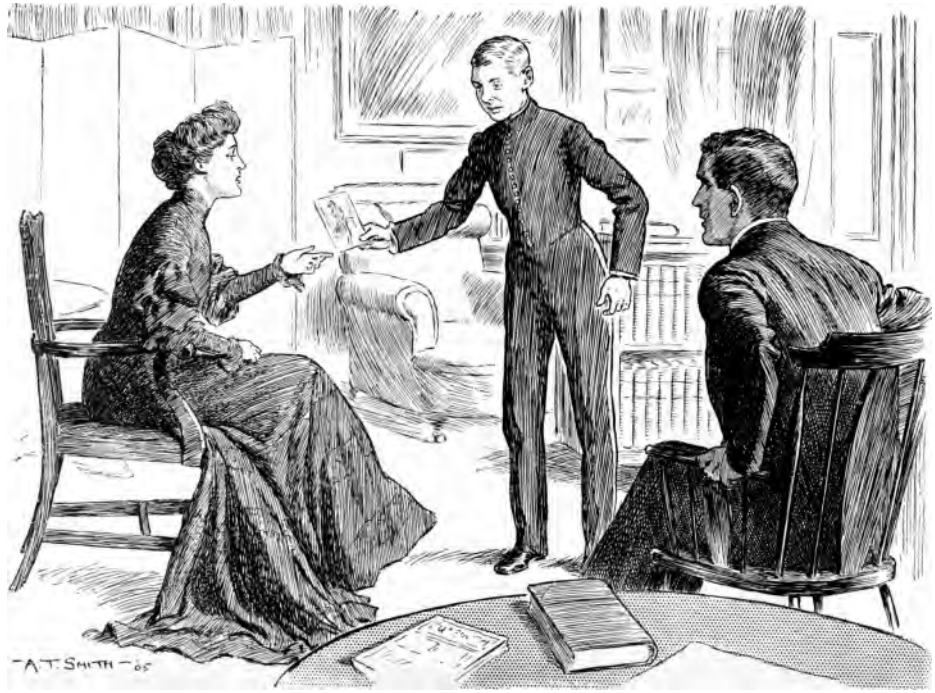
"I'll take the risk," said Alix, and looked at Harold.

"Certainly," he smiled; "by all means."

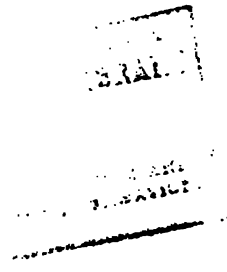
"I can refuse you nothing, Miss Parsons," said Ainsleigh, with another look which she did not like. "Keep the brat." And he left the room.

Tuckle executed a war-dance. "I'm to stop! Hurray! hurrah!" he chanted like a Red Indian. "And look at this, miss, since you're so kind."

Tuckle pulled out a photograph and thrust it into the hands of Alix. It was the photograph of a sailor.



"TUCKLE PULLED OUT A PHOTOGRAPH AND THRUST IT INTO THE HANDS OF ALIX" (*p. 76*).



CHAPTER VIII.

OLD BARNACLES.

"WHERE did you get this?" asked Harold, taking the portrait from Miss Parsons' hands.

"Found it in Mr. Ainsleigh's box. He guv me one with a lot of old rubbish, and told me to tidy up. I found that."

"Oh, and why did you keep it?"

"Ho!" said Tuckle, looking very shrewd and very wicked, "y' see, sir, as a sailor called to see dead missus, and when I saw that, I ses, 'Oh, my eyes,' I ses, 'that's him!'"

"But how do you know?" asked Alix.

"I saw the sailor cove when he called. It wos me as took him into the parlour, and let him out, when dead missus fainted."

Youle examined the portrait. It was that of a rather tall, stout, bearded man, with a scar on the right temple. He remembered the description given by Gilbert when the man called.

"Why didn't you tell this at the inquest?" he asked sharply. "You knew that Inspector Unwin wanted to know about the man."

"How could I have told, sir?" said Tuckle sulkily. "I didn't know as Mr. Ainsleigh knew the sailor chap."

"We don't know that he does."

"The picture was in his box, anyhow, sir. And I would have showed it but that Mr. Ainsleigh's nasty,

"Yes. I see. And then you forgot that the photograph was in your box?"

"Of course. I could not remember where I put it, and so said nothing about it at the inquest. Tuckle, as I said, found it by chance, and has tried to make trouble. Young imp! I'll clout him."

"No! He's not your servant now, remember."

"You needn't remind me of what I have lost," said Ainsleigh bitterly. "I know that you are engaged to Miss Parsons, and will be master here."

"Not for some time. I go to South America for a year."

"What? When a lovely girl with money wants to marry you?"

"I am not a man who lives on any woman," said Youle sharply.

Gilbert shrugged his shoulders. "That's a hit at me, I suppose," he said good-humouredly. "But we needn't argue. As to that portrait, your best plan is to show it to the police. I am as anxious as you to learn who killed my wife, seeing what I have lost by her death."

"Then you think that this sailor——"

"Oh, I don't say that he killed her," interrupted Gilbert easily; "but certainly in some way he was connected with her past life, and seemed to cherish some grudge against her, if one can judge from that unfinished letter which she left, and from the fact that she not only fainted, but refused to tell me anything about the man. He may have uttered threats, as she said, and he may have killed her. But, as you know, I was insensible at the time, so I know nothing. What will you do? Show that to the police?"

"Not just now," said Youle, pondering. "I'll do a little detective business on my own account."

"Would you like me to help you?"

"No. I merely intend to make inquiries at the village as to when this man came and went. Then I'll ask at the railway station, and perhaps I may learn from the ticket collector or booking clerk where he journeyed to."

Gilbert shrugged his shoulders. "Seems to me that you are embarking on a wild-goose chase," he said. "However, I can do nothing. My life here is at an end, so I go away to-morrow from this place for ever."

"For ever?" Harold wheeled at the door and looked back inquiringly.

"Yes; unless I have to come down and help to trace out the assassin of my wife."

"Have you any idea——"

"No. I think the sailor might have—but there, what do you expect me to know or say? I saw nothing of what took place. I'll probably leave you and Miss Parsons to find out who killed Barbara, seeing that you benefit by the will."

Youle said no more, but went away. Gilbert could not possibly know anything of the circumstances of his wife's death, seeing—as he very correctly stated—he had been insensible when the crime took place. As to the suspected sailor, he had given a perfectly frank and fair explanation as to how the photograph had come into his possession, and how Tuckle had gained possession of it. Also, it was plain to see that the page, hating Ainsleigh, had wished to make trouble by giving the photograph into the hands of Alix. Harold, connecting the visit of the sailor with Mrs. Ainsleigh's refusal to explain to her husband, with her fainting, and

with the unfinished letter she had left behind her, began to think that the man really was the criminal. It only remained to learn if he had been in the neighbourhood on the fatal Sunday, and to find out how he had entered the house. Also it was necessary to discover how he came to know the passages of the rambling old Grange so well that he was easily enabled to escape.

"The man must have been well acquainted with Mrs. Ainsleigh," said Harold to himself, as he set out on a voyage of discovery, "since he knew the house, and the legend; and also he must have known that she had heart disease, and was likely to fall dead if she saw the ghost, in which she believed. But why did the man want to kill her? What was the secret between himself and his victim? Can it be that she was married before and to this man? Or——" Here Youle's imagination came to a full stop. After all, it was useless to build up theories without any foundation. All that he could do was to search for the sailor, who was probably called Orlando. When he was found, the truth might come to light. Until then everything was obscure.

But Youle's detective business proved to be far less successful than his exploring. He first of all went to Helstone, five miles away, which was the nearest railway station to Blastorne, and inquired about the noticeable man who had arrived and left the district on the Monday preceding the date of Mrs. Ainsleigh's tragic death. He found, however, that Inspector Unwin had been beforehand with him, and had learned nothing. Sparrow, the detective engaged by Gilbert, had inquired also. But no man at all resembling the sailor had arrived on that date, as porters and station-master and ticket-collectors and booking clerks insisted; and no

man had left either. The bearded sailor with the scar on his right temple had never been seen in the district, so Harold tramped back to Blastorne, wondering how the stranger had entered the neighbourhood. On the way back, and near the village, he met the lean little detective, looking sour and angry.

"Mr. Ainsleigh's dismissed me," said Sparrow, who seemed annoyed. "He said as his wife had left him nothing, he didn't see why he should pay to find out who killed her. I saw Miss Parsons, who has the money, and she referred me to you."

Harold thought for a few minutes. "I can say nothing at present," he said. "I have your address in town, as Inspector Unwin gave it to me, so I'll write if I wish you to proceed in the case."

"You can't do without me, sir," said Sparrow plaintively.

"Probably not, since I am an amateur. Have you found out anything as it is?"

"Well, sir, I found that that sailor who came on the Monday was seen talking to an old fellow called Barnacles, who is also a sailor. He lives near the Grange, just outside the park wall, in a little cottage, and——"

"Yes," interrupted Youle. "I remember. He is a poor *protégé* of Mrs. Ainsleigh. She allows him a pension—or rather *did* allow it to him—poor woman!—seeing she is dead. Well?"

Sparrow turned sulky. "I don't say any more till I know where I stand, sir," said he defiantly. "Mr. Ainsleigh has paid me very badly for my trouble, and if Miss Parsons won't give me the job, I'll shut up. Come, sir, you seem to be the gentleman that the young lady takes the advice of. Let me see this thing through."

"Not at present, Sparrow. I must think it over."

The detective looked annoyed. "But why?"

"I can't explain just now. Wait till you hear from me."

"Very good, sir." A glance at Youle's face showed that he was not a man to be trifled with, so Sparrow accepted the inevitable. "You know my address, so I'll wait till I hear." And he tramped off, still looking sour and disappointed.

Had he known what was passing in Youle's mind he would not have been so despondent. Youle had every intention of advising Alix to engage the man's services, only he wished to speak with her on the subject before coming to a final decision. Meanwhile, he pursued his way to the village with the determination of calling on Old Barnacles, who evidently knew the mysterious sailor.

No one knew the real name of Old Barnacles. The nickname, given to him ten years before in the village, stuck to him, and no one called him anything else. He did not seem to mind, but responded with slow sullenness to the appellation. Certainly, he was a queer old man, and his unpopularity in the village was due to the fact that he never would gossip. He had been a sailor in one of the ships owned by Mrs. Ainsleigh's father, who had been somewhat of a speculator, and she had pensioned him off in a small cottage when he grew too old for the sea. Usually she called to see him every week, and took a great interest in him. This was put down to her kind philanthropic heart; but now that it seemed Old Barnacles knew the sailor who was being inquired for, and whom Youle, for one, suspected of committing the crime, it seemed to the young man that Mrs. Ainsleigh's visits were concerned with more than

philanthropy. However, a few minutes' conversation with the old shellback might throw some light on the identity of the man called Orlando.

The cottage was but a stone's-throw away from the red brick wall which girdled the Grange park. From the gate Harold could see a small postern in the wall, wherefrom Mrs. Ainsleigh had usually issued to pay her visits to the old sailor. There was quite a path worn by the feet which were now still for ever. The path led through a small meadow golden with buttercups, and came directly to the white gate which was set in a fence of green-painted palings. Within the fence the ground was filled with flowers, for Old Barnacles was a notable gardener, and possessed an antique cart and a slow, aged pony, with which he drove to Helstone and the surrounding villages to dispose of plants.

When Youle reached the gate, the twilight was closing in, and Old Barnacles was in the garden attending to some rose trees. He raised his head as Youle approached, and the young man saw that he was old and bent, rugged and tanned, with one eye and a wooden leg. For the reason also that he had lost a limb did the old man make his journeys in the cart drawn by the ancient pony. The kindness of Mrs. Ainsleigh had supplied him with the vehicle. The pony had been bought by Old Barnacles himself out of his savings, and was quite a Derby winner in the proud eyes of the ancient sailor turned gardener.

"Good day, Barnacles," said Harold, who knew him very well, since, as boy and man, he had frequently visited the man in the company of Mrs. Ainsleigh, then Miss Blastorne, and had listened to his sea tales.

Old Barnacles, who hated Harold a degree less than

he usually did his fellow creatures as a whole, hobbled to the fence and extended a large, horny hand.

"Muster Youle, sir, I hope you be well," said he.

"Very well, but rather sad, Barnacles."

"Ah, sir, she was a good lady," sighed the old sailor.

"She was. We shall all miss her."

"I more nor anyone. The business don't pay, Muster Youle, and my little bit of yearly money——"

"You'll still have that, Barnacles. Miss Parsons has inherited the estates, and she will continue the pension."

Old Barnacles opened his one fishy eye wide. "What about Muster Ainsleigh, the husband of she?" he demanded, with a growl. "Ain't he——"

"No," interrupted Harold. "He has been left nothing."

"And a good job too, sir. I niver liked he nohow. An' the young lady is as sweet as a daisy, she is, being your good lady some day, I do hear, Muster Youle."

"Yes. So you can rely on your pension being paid. By the way, Barnacles," went on Youle, in any easy conversational tone, so as not to arouse the man's suspicions, "there was a sailor called to see Mrs. Ainsleigh on the Monday before she died."

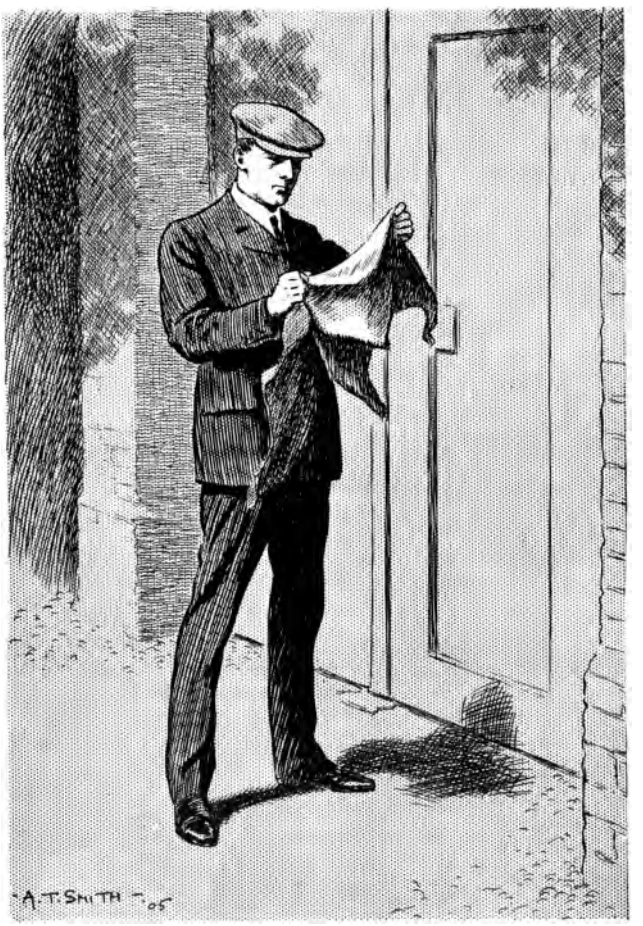
Old Barnacles searched his memory. "Ah, now I mind, sir," said he in his slow way. "A skipper of sorts, I mind. He come here, to where you be, Muster Youle, and he asks me the way to the Grange, being a fool like and not seeing it afore him. I p'inted, and he went."

"Was he a stranger here, Barnacles?"

"Not knowing the Grange and it being afore him, I think as he was, Muster Youle."

"Did you ever see him before?"

"I never clapped eyes on he, sir. But sailor he was



"IT CONTAINED A HOOD OF WHITE SERGE" (*p. 87*).

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by the cut of his jib, and a skipper from the quarter-deck way he commanded."

"Have you seen him since?"

"No, Muster Youle, I niver have. I saw him but that once, and he asked me for the Grange, it being afore him, and——"

"Then you know nothing about him?" said Youle, disappointed.

"No, Muster Youle, that I do not. He asked but the one question, and went round to the big gates."

"Not by the postern."

"Oh!" Old Barnacles opened his eye wide. "He niver knowed anything of it, being a stranger like."

This was all that could be got out of Old Barnacles, who was willing enough to give information, but apparently could not. Youle nodded a good-bye and went away slowly round by the park gates. Old Barnacles watched him depart, then went into his house. Youle walked to the village and made further inquiries, but could learn nothing. It was an hour later that he returned, entering the park by the great gates, and the day was now drawing rapidly to night. As he entered and closed the small gate which was let into the big one a package was thrown over. Youle picked it up, and found it was a brown paper parcel, rather small, and containing something soft. He glanced through the gate to see who had thrown it, but saw no one. Then he opened the package and looked at its contents in the waning light. It contained a hood of white serge. Then he remembered how the hood of the ghostly monk's dress had been torn off. And in that dress the murder had been committed.

CHAPTER IX.

UNEXPECTED INTELLIGENCE.

A STORM is invariably succeeded by a dead calm; therefore, after the strange incident of the monk's hood, Harold underwent no further melodramatic experiences for at least two months. He left Alix in possession of the house, with a subdued father in charge, and returned to London in order to prepare for his journey to South America. All the blandishments of Alix failed to make him relinquish his purpose of making money out of the Bolivian silver mine, and, in spite of the pain likely to be caused by his absence, the girl secretly respected him for his determination. It was sweet to think that she was loved by such a man for herself.

Dr. Parsons was pleased that the young man should go, as, now that Alix was rich, he did not wish her to marry Youle. Looking upon the Grange as his own, he attempted to exercise authority, and to dismiss Harold without hope. But so weak a man could not hold his own against the determination which Alix developed. She gave her father plainly to understand that he was not to meddle either in the house or in her love affairs. Being of age, she was perfectly competent to conduct both without paternal interference. Nevertheless, she rendered Parsons the obedience of a daughter in other respects, and the doctor found himself in very comfortable quarters. He talked much about the ingratitude of a child for whom he had sacri-

ficed so much, but when called upon to detail the sacrifices, he was unable to give a clear account. Finally he shed a few tears, and declared that his one object in life was to see Alix happy. She intimated that she would be, if he did not meddle, and with this he was forced to be content.

Thus it was that Harold departed with the knowledge that Alix would remain faithful to him, unbiassed by paternal nagging. At the end of a year he arranged to come back and make her his wife. Then the doctor was to be pensioned off, and Mr. and Mrs. Youle were to reside in the Grange. Alix and her lover talked over this and other matters before he took his departure.

"And what about the case, Harold?" she asked. "Will you do anything towards learning who killed poor Mrs. Ainsleigh?"

"I fear the truth will never come to light," he replied, after a moment's thought. "Unwin and the Helstone police have given up searching for the murderer. Sparrow, as you know, was sent away. And now that Ainsleigh has taken himself off, I don't suppose he will bother anything more about the matter. He is not likely to get any more money, and will be content to live on his five hundred a year. He is not the man to trouble himself about so complicated a case, unless he sees a fortune to be made out of it, and you have the fortune."

"He might wish to earn the reward," suggested Alix thoughtfully. "I think of offering the amount of one thousand pounds."

"Humph! A good many people will wish to earn that. It is a large sum, my dear girl."

"Not too large, if poor Mrs. Ainsleigh's death can

be avenged. After all, I inherit the money, so I should certainly do something. Also," added the girl, "it will set my mind at rest. It seems wrong that I should have the money Mr. Ainsleigh should inherit."

"I disagree with you. He was very unkind to his wife, and, moreover, he has benefited through her to the extent of enough to live on."

"Then the relatives, Harold?"

"There are no Blastornes living, I understand. Certainly your father talked the other day about some distant cousin called Orlando, but I don't know if that is his Christian name or his surname."

Alix nodded. "I asked father about him," she said. "but he could tell me nothing."

"He certainly is a sailor," remarked Youle after a pause; "for, if we can judge from the letter, the sailor was the man who uttered those unknown threats. He may be called Captain Orlando, for all we know. I'll look up the shipping list when I get to town. I don't think you need bother yourself about him, my dear. Seeing his position, he will not show up. He would be arrested if he did."

"Then you think that this Orlando murdered Mrs. Ainsleigh?"

"I can't say that," responded Youle cautiously; "but he uttered threats, according to the unfinished letter, and perhaps may have done the deed. On the other hand, as I remarked before, Mrs. Ainsleigh would scarcely begin a letter 'My dear Orlando,' to one who was likely to strangle her, although certainly she might not have imagined that he would go so far."

"I don't think he'll appear, Harold. But even if he did, he would not deserve the money."

"I think you can keep the money with a clear con-

science, Alix. The Blastorne family died with Mrs. Ainsleigh, and apparently there was no one she thought so worthy to have the old house as yourself."

The girl's eyes filled with tears.

"I loved her," she sobbed: "she was always kind and good. How terrible to think that she should meet with such a horrible death! We must learn who killed her."

"Then engage Sparrow, although I doubt if he will succeed. We have no clue, my dear Alix."

"There is the monk's hood."

Harold nodded. "That is very strange, I admit. I can't understand, in the first place, why the hood should have been torn from the gown, and, in the second, why the parcel should have come into my possession in so strange a manner."

"You saw no one throw it?"

"No one. I cast a glance through the gate when it fell, but no person was in sight. After I learned what the contents of the parcel were, I ran out into the road; but the person who threw it had made himself or herself scarce by that time."

"Why do you think it was a woman, Harold?"

"My dear, men have not the monopoly of crimes. I have no reason to say so, but a woman may be the assassin. A strong woman could easily strangle a frail creature like poor Mrs. Ainsleigh; and, again, the monk's dress is so like petticoats that a woman would have no difficulty in disguising herself in such a garb. But remember, Alix, I have no reason to give for this theory."

Alix pondered for a few minutes. "Harold, do you think it was the murderer who threw you the package?"

"No. Why should the assassin be so foolish? He

or she—if indeed a woman has anything to do with the matter—would not put evidence into my hands likely to solve the mystery."

"Then, who would——"

"My dear, I cannot say; but whosoever threw that package certainly knows the truth, and perhaps is anxious that the assassin should be captured. Unable to do so on his own account, the unknown places the clue in my possession. And again I say that this unknown may have been a woman."

"But if not the assassin, as you thought at first——"

"I think nothing, because I know nothing," broke in Youle impatiently. "All that I do know is that a clue has come into my possession. What use to make of it I cannot say."

"Is there no name on hood or dress?"

"None. Monks do not mark their linen, so far as I know."

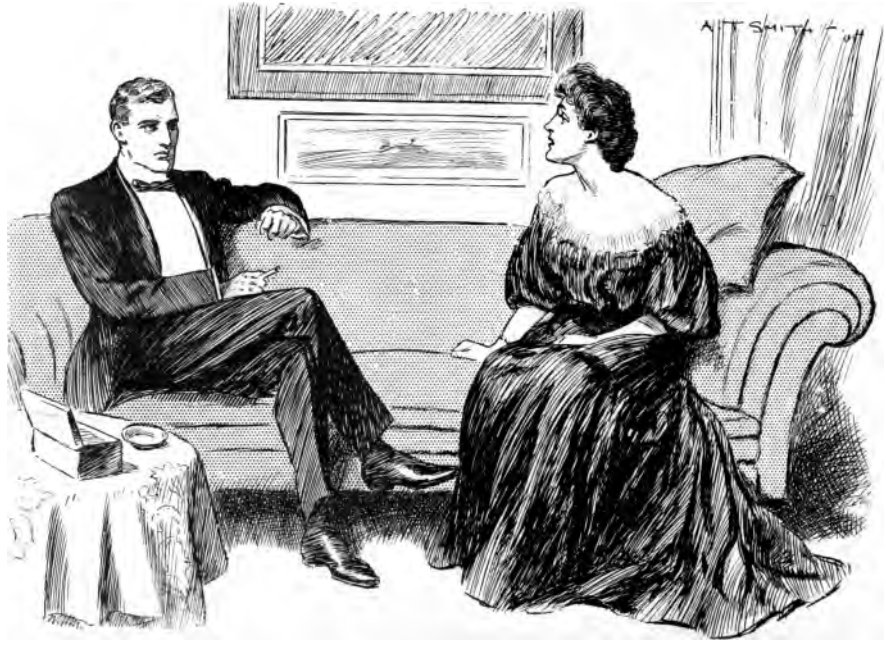
"But how do you know the dress belonged to a monk? There are no monks now."

"Oh, yes, there are, although they are not much in evidence in this country. The dress is that of a monk of the Cistercian order, and may have belonged to a real monastic person."

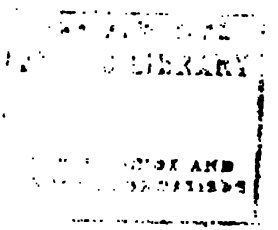
Alix shook her head. "That is impossible. No religious person would lend himself, or his dress, to such a wicked deed. The dress was made to order of the assassin, so that the trick on Mrs. Ainsleigh might be carried out. Therefore the name of the firm who made the dress would be on the garment."

Harold was struck by this reasoning.

"Well, you may be right," he said, pondering. "Certainly it would seem that the dress was manufactured on purpose. But there is no name on it, either



"'WHY DO YOU THINK IT WAS A WOMAN, HAROLD?'" (*p. 91*).



of possessor or firm of makers. Humph! I wonder if Sparrow could trace the firm who made the dress? It is so rare a costume to be made by any London firm, that it would not be difficult to trace."

"Why not see Mr. Sparrow and tell him what to do?"

"I'll see him when I get to town. I don't see much chance of the truth coming to light, and I fear Mrs. Ainsleigh's murder will have to be relegated to the limbo of undiscovered crime. Also I am going in a month—or say two months, as there is much to do—to South America, so I shall not be able to search. I'll see Sparrow, Alix, and give the case into his hands on your behalf. With a salary and a prospect of earning a thousand pounds extra, he will certainly do his best to run down the assassin, man or woman. As for myself, I wash my hands of it. An untrained person like me cannot hope to succeed where the police have failed."

In this way the matter was arranged. Harold returned to his chambers in Half Moon Street, Piccadilly, and sent for Sparrow. The lean little detective obeyed the summons eagerly, as business had been bad with him of late and he wished to earn money. Moreover, the mystery of the crime attracted him, and he foresaw that its solution would give him a widespread fame. With a puckered brow he listened to the story of the recovered hood. At its conclusion he shook his head.

"It is a difficult case," was his verdict. "I thought there was only one person concerned it it. Now it seems that there are two."

"Two?" Harold looked surprised. "Myself and Miss Parsons saw only one shadow—that of the presumed ghost."

"Quite so; but the supposed ghost, who was really

do so, and then have given you the clue to destroy that someone out of jealousy."

"But she could only have been jealous of Ainsleigh, according to your theory, and he——"

"He has nothing to do with the matter," finished Sparrow. "Quite so; but it seems to me——" He stopped and shook his head. "No, I can't think of any solution. Everything is muddled. All I can do is to follow the clue of this," and tapping on the brown paper parcel he took his departure, evidently in the most pessimistic of moods.

That was the last Youle saw of Sparrow for a couple of months, as he had to visit an old aunt in Devonshire, and did not return for some weeks. Even when he did, Sparrow did not call, nor did he write, and Youle determined to leave him to search out the truth in his own way. It was, as Sparrow had said, a dark path and very tortuous, so there was no use in troubling until some light was shown, or until further clues could be discovered.

Besides, Youle had much to do getting ready to go to Bolivia. He had arranged to write a book of travel for a firm of publishers, and, wishing the work to be illustrated, had recommended a young artist called Tony Brady, whom he had met before. Youle went to the boy's rooms in Bloomsbury—as Tony was but twenty, he could be called a boy—and found the artist at home. He offered to take him to Bolivia for the purpose of illustrating the travels, but to his surprise found that Mr. Brady was by no means inclined to go.

"Why, Tony, I thought you would jump at the chance," said Harold; "you always wanted to travel."

"He travels the fastest who travels alone," said Tony, who was tall and weedy, not bad-looking, and extremely self-confident.

Youle laughed. "That means you are in love."

Brady grew crimson. "She is an angel," he declared with conviction.

"She always is, my dear lad. And what are you going to live on?"

"Oh, I do very well in black-and-white illustrations. Then my mother will help. She is well off, as you know, and now that she has retired from the stage saves lots of money, since she is not likely to lose it in producing plays. Oh, yes, mother will help."

"Who is the girl?"

"Her name is Mary Jane Rug," said Tony fondly.

"What an unromantic name."

"Yes," admitted the lover reluctantly. "Her father —she has no mother—couldn't have known what she would grow up, or he would have called her something sweeter. But because she is called Mary Jane," declared the enthusiastic lover, "I feel that the glamour of romance is over the name. She is"—here Tony went into a detailed description of the girl's perfections, to which Youle listened patiently. Being in love himself he made every allowance for the boy's passion.

"And your mother will help you with money when you marry?"

Tony nodded. "I think so," he said rather uneasily. "In fact, I don't think she'll mind my marrying."

"I thought you were the stay and comfort of her old age?"

"Mother would be mad if she heard you call her old," said Brady, with a laugh; "besides, she's going to do without me and take a husband."

"The deuce! And the lucky man?"

"Oh, a fellow called Gilbert Ainsleigh."

CHAPTER X.

A PUZZLING LETTER.

WHEN Youle left Brady's rooms he felt that his head was in a whirl. It was scarcely two months since the death of Mrs. Ainsleigh, yet here was her scamp of a husband engaged to marry another woman, and one older than himself.

"Mrs. Brady. She must be—let me see," mused Harold, as he walked back to Half Moon Street, "why she must be over fifty. I remember my father talking about her. Humph! She's got money, same as the first Mrs. Ainsleigh. I'd like to see Mrs. Brady and her dear one. She must know that Ainsleigh's first wife died by violence, as it was in all the papers two months ago. I wonder she cares to marry the man; and then it's positively indecent of Ainsleigh to marry again with his first wife scarcely cold in her grave. I'll call and see how she came to fix up with him so quickly."

Harold could easily do this. He had known Mrs. Brady for years, and Tony since that clever young artist was a mere lad. It was his liking for Tony that led him to offer the chance of illustrating the book of travel to him, since Tony always had a desire to circumnavigate the globe. Besides, Mrs. Brady was a celebrity, and for some twenty years had been famous in the dramatic world. For a long time she had owned a theatre, and there had produced poetic plays by modern playwrights, alternating with grand productions of Shakespeare's dramas. Being quite a tragedy queen,

Mrs. Brady had never condescended to modern comedy, and had always looked upon herself as a second Siddons. The public admired her greatly, and had patronised her theatre largely.

Still handsome and popular, Mrs. Brady had retired twelve months ago—about the time of Gilbert Ainsleigh's marriage—and now occupied a bijou house at Campden Hill, furnished like a palace, and with far more taste. According to rumour, which is sometimes correct, she had a fine income, as she had always been a thrifty woman. Whosoever lost by the Elizabethan Theatre—that was the high-sounding name of the play-house lately owned by the popular tragedy queen—Mrs. Brady never squandered her money. Yet no one had ever breathed a word against her fair fame. The late Mr. Brady had been a low comedian, but had long since departed this life, leaving Mrs. Brady with one child, the boy Tony, who had early shown great talents as an artist. To Tony, Mrs. Brady had devoted her life, as she was a fond mother. It was therefore strange that she should permit Tony to marry, and stranger still that after five years of widowhood she herself should marry. Especially a scamp like Gilbert Ainsleigh, for she could have taken a much more respectable husband, and at one time could even have married a baronet. That she should decide to become the second Mrs. Ainsleigh, seeing how the first wife had died, seemed strange to Harold. Therefore, out of sheer curiosity, did he pay an afternoon visit to the bijou house on Campden Hill. Mrs. Brady was at home at five o'clock, seated before a tea equipage, and alone. When she saw Harold she sailed forward with both hands outstretched, and greeted him in her best theatrical style.

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"My dear boy"—everyone up to fifty was a dear boy to Mrs. Brady—"I am delighted to see you. Sit down, and tell all about yourself."

The retired actress was, as has been said, a trifle over fifty, and was a remarkably fine woman, large and tall and finely shaped, with an inclination to fleshy fulness. Her head was like that of Faustine the Roman Empress, and, indeed, in her looks and gait and stately manner there was something imperial. She was still on the stage in private life, and never lost the chance of making a dramatic point, or an effective entrance. Her brows and hair were still black, although this was probably due to art, and the contour of her face was cut like a cameo. Her figure also was splendid, although she inclined to stoutness. With the artfulness of a woman who had dressed for years to please a critical public, she wore a simple gown of bronze-coloured velvet, without any trimmings to spoil the superb cut. Brazilian diamond rings flashed on her shapely hands, but she wore no other jewels, and looked a remarkably refined and handsome woman as she sank back into a deep chair. Far too good for Gilbert Ainsleigh was Mrs. Brady, as Youle decided, for he knew her kind heart and life of hard work.

"I should think you knew all about me," said Harold, sitting down and glancing round the comfortable, dainty room, at the numerous photographs of celebrities, which were signed every one with handsome compliments to their present owner.

"And why should you think so, Youle?" asked Mrs. Brady, who addressed all her male friends in this unceremonious way, from the habit of thus speaking to her company and managers.

"Humph! I saw Tony yesterday."

"The dear boy! He's in love."

"Are you pleased?"

Mrs. Brady passed him a cup of tea with the air of Queen Eleanor handing the poison to Rosamund. "Oh, yes; why shouldn't the boy amuse himself? He is but a child, and children will play."

"But isn't it rather risky for children to play with fire?"

"Fire?" Mrs. Brady lifted her thick black brows.

"In this case, Tony wants to marry this girl."

"Oh, Tony has wanted to marry half the women in the world since he came to years of indiscretion. But I'll see that he does not go too far, my dear boy. Don't alarm yourself."

"But Tony said that you approved."

"I neither approve nor disapprove. Let the boy play. I have never seen the girl. She lives at Pitsea, I believe, amongst the marshes. Tony saw her when he went down to Canvey Island to sketch. He has been raving about her since."

"Then he may marry her?"

"Oh, dear, no. Tony is not yet clever enough to earn money by his black-and-white drawings, and if he made this girl his wife I should not give him a penny."

"But he said you would be pleased."

"Really!" Mrs. Brady calmly filled another cup. "Silly boy! I shall make him give up his rooms and come back here. I wanted him to be independent, and so let him set up in Bloomsbury as a bachelor; but if he wishes to marry this Pitsea creature, he will have to shelter again under my protecting wing."

"Won't three in this house be inconvenient?" blurted out Youle.

Mrs. Brady raised her eyebrows again. "Three?"

engaged to that Miss Parsons who got the money, and you are hunting down the assassin. Do you expect to find him in Gilbert?"

"Oh, no." Harold hastened to dispel this idea. "I myself saw him asleep in a summer-house at the end of the garden when the crime was committed. He is innocent."

"Then who is guilty?"

Harold shrugged his shoulders. "I really can't say."

"Have you found out nothing?"

"Nothing. So far as I have gone the case stands thus"—and he explained everything, even to the finding of the monk's dress and the recovery of the hood. "What do you make of it?" he asked Mrs. Brady, when his recital was ended.

She had kept her eyes on him the whole time he was speaking in a most embarrassing manner, but had not said one word likely to reveal what she thought. When he ended, she threw herself back in her chair and produced a cigarette. "Will you have one?" she asked, passing the case. "They are Turkish."

Youle mechanically took the little roll of paper, and struck a match to light Mrs. Brady's cigarette and his own. "What do you think of it all?" he repeated, when the smoke was perfuming the air.

"I think that you will never learn the truth," she said slowly.

"I think so myself," he confessed. "Yet this Sparrow seems to be a clever detective."

"Even the cleverest detectives are not superhuman," she retorted. "I advise you to give up searching."

"Personally, I have no intention of searching. I go to South America next week, and will probably remain absent for a year. At the end of that time I return to

marry Miss Parsons. But Sparrow has the case in hand, and tempted by a great reward—a thousand pounds it is—he will do his best to run this assassin to earth."

"He will never discover the truth," said Mrs. Brady calmly.

"Why do you say that again?"

"Because there is nothing else to say," she retored impatiently. "Badly as you think of Gilbert, he would give much to learn who killed the unfortunate woman."

"He loved her, then?" inquired Harold sarcastically.

Mrs. Brady blew a cloud of smoke, and leaned her finely-moulded arms on the bamboo tea-table. "See here, my dear boy," she remarked in her deep voice, and with a perfectly self-possessed air, "I have no delusions regarding Gilbert Ainsleigh. I know well that he is what you call an adventurer. He undoubtedly married Miss Blastorne for her money, although he won't confess as much, even to me. But, seeing what he lost by her death, he certainly did not kill her."

"I never said or hinted that he did, Mrs. Brady."

"Nor did he wish for her death, or employ anyone else to do so. He knew well that she would alter her will, owing to his unfortunate habit of taking morphia. He has now given up the drug, and is quite himself. I like him sufficiently to marry him, and as I have the money and he has not, I am quite able to control him should he become my husband. He will not have a feeble old woman to deal with in me," added Mrs. Brady grimly, "and I have not managed theatrical companies for years without knowing how to control the worst of men. I am not yet engaged to Gilbert Ainsleigh, in spite of what that foolish Tony says, but I may marry him—perhaps,—I am not sure."

"Let me advise you not to," said Youle emphatically. "I don't trust Ainsleigh's reformation. He may return to the drug yet, and then what would your life be?"

"What I made it," she exclaimed impetuously. "You must think me a very feeble woman, Youle. I know how to deal with this man, and—I—I—well, I like him."

"Do you *love* him? for without love there can be no happiness."

Mrs. Brady flung her half-smoked cigarette away, and struck her hands pettishly together. "Yes, I do love him," she said. "I know that he is not a good man and all the rest of it, but I love him. Are you answered?"

"Yes," said Youle, rising and taking up his silk hat, "and I like you sufficiently to be very sorry to hear it."

"Would you say that to Gilbert himself?"

"I would, and much more into the bargain. You don't suppose for one moment that I would not?"

"No." She looked at him with admiration. "You are a man, Youle—quite a real, true man. I hope you'll be happy in your marriage. I am not yet engaged, you see, and perhaps never may be, although on the whole I think I shall. Don't let us talk any more about the matter. Leave Gilbert to me. I know how to deal with him. As to Tony—we may as well end the conversation where we began—I don't want him to marry this Pitsea girl. He's a fool. Can't you make him give up this girl?"

"What influence have I with Tony?" asked Harold carelessly. "All I can do is to take Tony with me to South America next week. I want someone to illustrate

a projected book of travels, and I think he is good enough to do what I require. But he won't come."

"He will come," said Mrs. Brady firmly. "I'll see to that. Call again in a few days, and I'll talk to you about Tony. Also I should like you to meet Gilbert."

"Very well, only——"

"You'll be rude to him. No, I won't have it."

"I'll be civil enough," said Youle drily, "but if he is going to engage himself to you, I really think he might wait for a few months. The late Mrs. Ainsleigh——"

"I hate the late Mrs. Ainsleigh," flashed out Mrs. Brady, her face clouding. "Don't talk to me about that woman."

"Ah, I see now that you love Gilbert," said Youle with a shrug, "and in that case there is nothing left for me to say. Who can argue with a woman who thinks her goose a swan?"

"It is none of your business," Mrs. Brady reminded him haughtily.

"No—only I am sorry." And with that he took his leave.

It did not seem to Youle that he had gained much by his visit. He had certainly learned that Mrs. Brady loved Gilbert and intended to marry him, although the pair were not yet engaged. But he was quite sure that, fine woman as Mrs. Brady was, Gilbert did not love her. He had lost the money of his first wife, and now he was trying to get a fortune with the second. Youle assuredly did not suspect Gilbert of having anything to do with the murder of Mrs. Ainsleigh, and yet he wondered that Mrs. Brady could have the courage to marry him. Moreover, she seemed very certain that nothing would be discovered regarding the murder. It

flashed into Youle's mind how Sparrow had thought a jealous woman was implicated in the matter. Mrs. Brady loved Gilbert, and was of a jealous nature. Was it possible that she—but no; Harold put the idea out of his head. It was too ridiculous. And, after all, the marriage of Ainsleigh was none of his business. Neither he nor Mrs. Brady had anything to do with the crime, and what they did was their own affair. By the time Youle had reached Half Moon Street he had dismissed the matter from his mind, and began to think of his projected journey. He would certainly take Tony away from the Pitsea girl, and sail for South America next week.

A letter was waiting for him on his table when he entered his sitting-room, and he at once recognised the writing as that of Alix. He opened it with an exclamation of delight, for she had not written him for a week. But when he finished reading it, he sat down with a startled and puzzled face. The letter contained but a few lines.

"I cannot marry you," wrote Alix. "Our engagement must end. Forgive me and forget me."

CHAPTER XI.

ALIX GIVES HER REASON.

THE inexplicable letter from Alix made Youle as angry as a usually self-controlled man well could be. Two months previously he had left her with the understanding that she would remain true to him, and that nothing would come between them during his absence. Yet even before he had gone to South America, she suddenly broke the engagement and without assigning any reason. Such a thing was not to be borne by a high-spirited man, and the next morning Harold was on his way to Blastorne, with the full determination to learn why Alix acted in so strange a manner. Seeing that she was now rich and had developed a firm character, he did not think that her father had influenced her in any way. And since that she loved him truly, Harold could not think that mere caprice had dictated the refusal to marry him. The affair, as he decided, must be sifted thoroughly; therefore did he make up his mind to demand an explanation.

On alighting at Helstone, he stepped out of the railway station, only to meet Old Barnacles face to face. The cart of the ancient, a queer vehicle with a hood, and drawn by an old white pony, was close at hand, and near this stood the sailor handing out potted plants to a porter. Doubtless he was on business at the station, and was disposing of the goods in which he

dealt. On seeing Harold, his dull, wrinkled face lighted up, and he touched his hat.

"Muster Youle," said Old Barnacles, "this is a sight for sore eyes, to be sure. And how may you be finding yourself, sir?"

"Quite well. And you, Barnacles?"

The ancient salt scratched what remained of his hair. "I be vexed, Muster Youle, because of our young lady."

"Miss Parsons?" asked Harold, wondering what had happened.

"Surely. A fine handsome young lady, and as bright as the dawn. She comes to see me, and talk of old Madam as is dead and gone, saying I shall have my bit of money till I goes to the churchyard. Aye, Muster Youle, these two months have she come, always gay and merry-like—till a week ago."

"What do you mean?"

"She's sad-like now, Muster Youle, and sits in my cabin a-crying her pretty eyes as red as herrings. What have you been doing, Master Youle?"

"I?—why, nothing, Barnacles."

"Aye, but there's something she's vexed about, Muster Youle, and you being going to marry her. 'Tis a quarrel of lovers, if I may make bold to say so."

"Nothing of the sort, Barnacles. I have not seen her for two months."

Old Barnacles feebly slapped his thigh. "And that's why she cried, Muster Youle. What for should you leave the sweet rose, Muster Youle, and let him as married old Madam foller her here, there, and all over the place, as her swain?"

Harold started. "I am engaged to Miss Parsons,

Barnacles, and no one else is her swain. Are you talking of Mr. Ainsleigh?"

"Him as married old Madam. Aye, for sure, Muster Youle."

"Has he been down here?"

"Off and on for a fortnight, as you might say. Two days ago, Muster Youle, he was here, smiling on the young lady, and lover-like they seemed, Muster Youle."

"Oh, that's rubbish," began Youle, angry at the mere thought; then he checked himself. It was best to speak to Alix herself and to learn why Gilbert Ainsleigh had been haunting the place. "Where did Mr. Ainsleigh stop while here, Barnacles?"

"At the Blastorne Arms, Muster Youle. Aye, Mrs. Push, she looked arter him, she did, being taken with his handsome face and free manner. Not as I think much of him myself," added the sailor, "he not having been a good man to old Madam."

"How do you know that?"

"Why, old Madam, she often came to see me, Muster Youle, and sad enough she seemed at times. Not as she said anything, being proud-like. But sad she was, and twice I hear her having high words with Muster Ainsleigh." Old Barnacles sank his voice. "A bad un he is, Muster Youle, you take my word for that."

With a mysterious nod, the ancient turned to take the nose-bag off the white pony. In doing so, it tilted, and a letter fell out. "Deary me!" said the sailor, "if that isn't what I want to post, putting it in the nose-bag, Muster Youle, in case as I might forget it." And picking up the letter, he moved to the red pillar-box close at hand. Before he could put it in, Harold grasped his wrist.

"Who is that letter to?" he asked sharply.

"Some un as I knows," said Barnacles sullenly, and suddenly contrived to slip the letter into the box.

"Then you know someone called Captain Orlando," cried Youle excitedly. "I saw that much of the address when the letter was on the ground; but the last name, the surname—what is it?"

"I ain't a-goin' to tell, Muster Youle."

"You must tell, Barnacles. Mrs. Ainsleigh said in an unfinished letter that someone called Orlando uttered threats. He was the sailor who visited her, as Unwin thinks. You saw that man, as you told me, and you denied knowing him. Now you send a letter to him."

"It was given to me to send, Muster Youle."

"Who gave it to you?"

"I shan't say," retorted the old sailor, climbing into his cart. "You ain't got no right to ask questions."

"I have. I mean to learn who killed Mrs. Ainsleigh, and you know."

"I dunno—I dunno."

"You do. This Orlando, if not guilty himself, knows who murdered the poor woman. Give me his address."

"I dunno. I can't read nor write, Muster Youle."

"The person who gave you the letter to post must have told you the name of Captain Orlando—his last name, I mean. Also the person might have mentioned the address."

"No, sir! I niver heard naught, I didn't. Post this letter, was the order, and posted it I have, so good day to you, Muster Youle."

Old Barnacles shook the reins, and the aged pony started away at a slow amble. Harold did not seek to detain the man, as now all his aim was to learn the address on the letter. Could Captain Orlando—as Youle called him, because he did not know his surname

—be found, he might be able to explain why he had called during that fatal week, and perhaps might be able to throw some light on the execution of what seemed to be a purposeless crime. Harold tried to open the pillar-box, but, needless to say, did not succeed. Then he walked rapidly to see the station-master. This individual proved to be a grumpy person, who had no power to give up the letter.

"Nothing as is put in, comes out," said the stern official, "but if the post-mistress as is in Blastorne village says as you can look at the letter, why, that's her business, and not mine."

"But I tell you the production of this letter may lead to the detection of the man who killed Mrs. Ainsleigh."

"That's got to do with the authorities," snapped the man, and with this Harold was forced to be content. He knew well that the postal authorities would not pass over any letter to a stranger, but under the circumstances he thought that a point might be stretched. Without another word, he walked to Blastorne, and interviewed the post-mistress. She was a cheery, bright little woman, and her sympathies were quite with Youle.

"But I don't see what I can do, sir," said she brightly. "We have nothing to do with the station posting here. You must ask at the Helstone post office."

Harold struck his hands together angrily. It was five miles to Helstone, and having walked that distance once he did not feel inclined to return. However, the post-mistress of Blastorne was right. The Helstone authorities were the people to apply to, if he wanted a sight of the letter. He went to the "Blastorne Arms," and hired a horse, then rode under whip and spur to

the town. Here, on making inquiries, he found that he had lost his fish. The postal bag had been made up, and was on its way to town. "If I only had driven that five miles at first," thought Youle, much vexed, "or had thought of going to the Helstone office! Now there is no chance unless the London postal authorities will show me the letter. Shall I go to town?"

After some reflection, he decided that he would not, and indeed it seemed to be something of a wild-goose chase. By the time he reached London the letter would probably have been sent out along with the others to whatever district it was directed. Then there would be all manner of red-tape officialism likely to prevent his attaining his object. On the whole, it seemed best to question Old Barnacles. True, the old man said that he could not read, and therefore would not be able to say what address or name was on the envelope of the mysterious letter; but at least he might be forced to state who had given it to him to post, and the person who had written it might be compelled to repeat the contents, and also reveal the whereabouts of this mysterious Captain Orlando. Having made up his mind to this course, Harold rode back to Blastorne. He did not consult Inspector Unwin at Helstone, as he wished to keep the matter, for the present at all events, in his own hands. It just struck him that Alix might have written the letter, and have given it to Barnacles to post at Helstone, so that gossip might be avoided at Blastorne. So far as Youle knew, Alix was not acquainted with Captain Orlando, but the fact of her having been lately tearful in Barnacles' house, along with the posting of the letter and her refusal to marry him, hinted that she had learned of something connected with the crime while he was absent which had altered her atti-

tude towards him. The case was becoming more difficult at each discovery, and Harold tried to puzzle out the affair as he raced for Blastorne. Needless to say, under existing circumstances he could gain no clue.

At the "Blastorne Arms" he put up his horse, and engaged a room for the night. He wished to remain in the village and again see Old Barnacles, to learn if possible whether Alix had given him the letter to post. Alix herself certainly would not confess that she had done so, even to her lover, since Youle felt certain that her breaking of the engagement was connected with the crime in some way. However, he could come to no conclusion until he saw her, and walked to the Grange as soon as he had made his arrangement for a night's lodging with Mrs. Push, the landlady of the "Blastorne Arms." As he walked, he felt his brain whirling with the multiplicity of thoughts therein, and small wonder. The present aspect of the case would have puzzled Solomon himself.

Harold had not intimated that he would come to Blastorne, and Alix was surprised to see him. The footman conducted him to the parlour wherein Mrs. Ainsleigh had met with her tragic death, and here Youle found the girl looking pale and ill. According to custom, he had sent up his card, and this lay on the floor torn into two pieces. He pointed to them with a stern face. "Does that show your present state of mind?" he said, without preamble.

"Why have you come—oh, why have you come?" This was all she could say, clasping and unclasping her hands meanwhile. Youle was shocked to see how ill she looked. Formerly she was inclined to be plump, but now her clothes hung loosely upon her. Her face was perfectly white with emotion, her eyes were red, and

Youle tried another tack. "Gilbert Ainsleigh has been here!"

"He has been stopping at the 'Blastorne Arms,'" said Alix coldly, "and he has every right to stop here if he chooses."

"But he has not every right to walk with you, seeing that you are engaged to me," cried Youle, white to the lips with passion, but controlling himself in a most praiseworthy manner.

"Who said that he did?"

"Old Barnacles. You went to his cottage; you walked with Ainsleigh constantly. You were, as the old man said, lover-like."

"It is not true. I hate Gilbert Ainsleigh."

"Then why walk with him? Come, Alix"—he tried again to take her hand, and again she avoided him—"tell me the meaning of this mysterious change on your part."

"I tell you I cannot," she cried, and wrung her hands.

"Then I will seek an explanation from Gilbert Ainsleigh."

"He will give you none."

"Then the explanation has to do with him?"

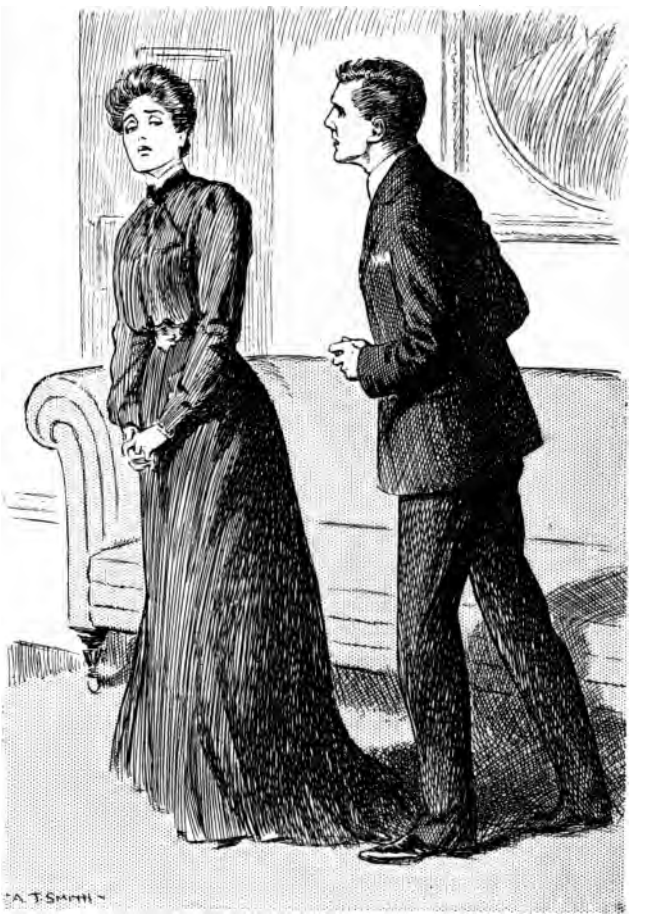
"I don't see what business that is of yours, Mr. Youle," said the girl doggedly. "I am not engaged to you now."

"You are. I decline to give you up."

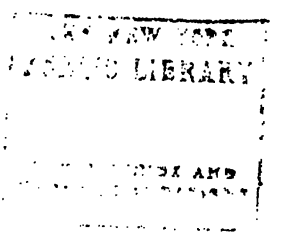
"I am not," she insisted. "I am engaged to——"

"Engaged to—— What do you mean?"

"I am engaged to Gilbert Ainsleigh."



"'I AM ENGAGED TO GILBERT AINSLEIGH'" (*p. 118*).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CHAPTER XII.

AN AMAZING REVELATION.

YOULE recoiled, and stared at her. Before his fiery gaze Alix shrank back, trying to steel herself to endure it, but without success; for after a few moments she again sat down and concealed her face.

"You must be mad," said Harold at last. "Gilbert Ainsleigh! Why, his wife has only been dead two months."

"We will not marry for a year."

Harold burst out into a torrent of passionate words. "Shameless!" he cried vehemently. "How can you speak in this way? Mrs. Ainsleigh was good to you—she was your best friend; she left you her money, and yet, before she is cold in her grave, you propose to marry her husband—the man who broke her heart. Oh, Alix, how bitterly I have been deceived in you!"

She shrank again before his righteous anger. "I cannot defend myself, Harold," she muttered faintly.

"That means you will not trust me?"

"I cannot." She made an effort to assert herself. "There is nothing to tell you."

"There are many things. Why have you broken our engagement? Why are you engaged to Ainsleigh? Why will you not tell me the truth? Alix," he went on vehemently, "there is something strange about all this—something wicked if it has to do with Gilbert Ainsleigh, and——"

"Why do you say wicked?"

"Because I know the man. I begin to think he has something to do with the murder——"

"No, no! You dare not say that," she broke in with a cry. "He was asleep when poor Mrs. Ainsleigh was killed. You saw him, as I did."

"I don't say that he killed her himself, but he may have procured someone to——"

"That also is untrue," cried Alix again. "Why should Gilbert procure the murder of a wife to whom he owed all? He did not inherit the money, as you know."

"He did not know that the will was altered."

"He did. He told you himself that his wife would probably leave him without a penny."

"I cannot deny that," said Harold, puzzled; then went on bitterly, "and I cannot but think that he knew you would inherit, and had his wife murdered so that he might marry you."

"Why should he want to do that?" she asked, pale but defiant.

"Have you forgotten that at one time you thought he was in love with you, and was likely to propose?"

"He married Mrs. Ainsleigh."

"For her money," said Harold; "and now it seems that he is to marry you for love. I understand by getting rid of his elderly wife, and inducing her to leave the money to you, he does away with all suspicion against himself, and thus secures you whom he loves, and the fortune also. Am I not right?"

"No—a thousand times no. I do not love Gilbert."

"But he loves you," said Youle, and when Alix was silent, he continued, "and if you do not love him, why do you marry him?"

"Because I choose to," she said, defiantly.

"We are working round to the beginning of our conversation, Alix. I do not know the meaning of all these things; but I mean to learn."

"You know that I cannot marry you, and that I intend to become the wife of Gilbert, when the period of mourning has expired," said Alix obstinately.

"You dare to tell me this?"

"Yes!"

The word dropped curtly from her lips, and Harold looked more puzzled than ever. He could not believe that this stern, defiant woman was the gentle girl he loved, and who hitherto had said that she loved him.

"Your father is forcing you to do this?"

"No. My father does not know that my engagement is broken. He does not know that I am to marry Gilbert."

"You shall never marry him."

"I must—I must—I must."

"Alix," Harold had hitherto kept himself well in hand, but now all the love of his heart surged to his lips, "my dearest, surely you will not ruin my life by casting me aside? You do not even give a reason. You love me—I know you love me. Even while you speak so coldly, so cruelly, I know that you love me. Love sits in your eyes, try as you may to drive him away. You dare not look me in the face and say that you do not love me."

Alix tried to meet his eyes, but failed. Twice she tried to speak, then dashed forward her hands with a passionate gesture. "Go! Go!" she cried faintly. "You are killing me—you are——" she broke off and ran to the door. Before he could intercept her she had opened it and passed through. In a moment

Harold was in the passage following her, but she sped as rapidly as her failing strength would let her in the direction of her bedroom. Youle halted some way down the corridor, and heard the door slam. It sounded like the knell of his doom. He stood fixed where he was for quite five minutes in the hope that a revulsion of feeling would make her rejoin him. Then he turned away with a heavy sigh. The sunshine of life had vanished, and he could see no reason why the clouds had come. Yet there they were overhead, growing darker and more menacing every moment.

Like a man in a dream he took his way down the stairs, and in the hall brushed against Tuckle. The boy, more pasty-faced and shrewd than ever, looked at him keenly. "Ain't you well, sir?" he asked boldly.

Youle put the lad aside and opened the front door himself, as the footman was not within hearing. Then he suddenly recollected that he might learn something from the father of the woman who had thrown him over. "Where is Dr. Parsons?" he asked Tuckle.

"He went to the village, sir," said the boy, "and may be back at any minute, Mr. Youle."

"Ask him to call at the 'Blastorne Arms' this evening," said Youle, descending the steps. "I wish to see him." Then, without waiting for a reply, he walked down the avenue.

Tuckle stared after him with a cunning expression. Then he took out a half sheet of paper from his pocket upon which some words were scrawled in pencil. After reading this, the lad nodded his head twice in a satisfied manner, and slipped the paper again into his pocket, with a shrill whistle. Afterwards he proceeded to the kitchen with so gleeful a face that he was rebuked by

Thomson the butler, who had no love for the too-clever London lad.

Youle was fortunate enough to meet Dr. Parsons at the gate. The old man was trotting along, doing his breathing exercise, and counting aloud at the conclusion of every breath. He seemed surprised to meet Youle, but welcomed him with a smile.

"I have found out a new thing," he said confidentially, and without any preliminary greeting; "we are made of atoms, and the spirit body controls those atoms. I really am a spirit walking about in an overcoat, and therefore I can never be ill."

Youle stared at him, not comprehending this lucid address. Parsons, seeing that he did not understand, was about to begin again, when he noticed the haggard looks of the visitor. "You look ill, Youle. I hope you and Alix have not quarrelled?"

"That would please you, I should think," said Youle sarcastically.

"No, no!" replied the doctor briskly. "I have had time to reconsider my determination regarding the well-being of Alix. I am now quite content that she should marry you."

"She is not content, however, Dr. Parsons. As she has not told you herself, I can tell you——"

"Tell me what?"

"That the engagement you disapprove of is at an end."

"You are not going to marry Alix?" asked Parsons, turning red.

"I can scarcely do that, seeing she has engaged herself to your friend, Gilbert Ainsleigh."

The doctor turned so white that Harold thought he was about to faint. He staggered against the iron gates

and seemed to collapse. "That is the price," he muttered under his breath, but not so low that Youle did not hear him.

"It is the price of something, which Alix refuses to describe. Perhaps you can enlighten me."

"No! I know nothing. Ainsleigh has been here, and certainly he has always been attracted by Alix. But why he should ask her to marry him I cannot say."

"Humph! Can you say why she, who loves me, should accept Ainsleigh?"

"No, no!" said the doctor, wiping his bald forehead.

"Then what about the article for which the price you mention, has to be paid?"

Parsons looked confused, then suddenly rallied under the influence of a new thought. "Ainsleigh intended to dispute the will," he said briskly, "but instead of going to law he and Alix have made up their minds to marry, and so settle the matter. She never told me anything of this, however."

"So she said."

"I am very sorry for you, Youle," went on the doctor pompously, "but you can see for yourself that it is better Alix should marry and avoid litigation."

"I can see that she is marrying the husband of the woman who loved her," cried Youle vehemently, "and when that woman is not yet cold in her grave. You are selling your daughter to a dishonourable marriage, so as to keep this money."

"I have nothing to do with the matter," stammered the doctor, uneasily.

"According to Alix you have not," responded Harold bitterly. "All the same, I do not believe in your explanation. You may call the retention of the money by

marriage as the price to be paid, but there is something else—something that has to do with the murder."

Parsons turned yellow and green—all the colours of the rainbow, in fact—and looked very sick and qualmish. "I really cannot listen to this talk," said he with a ghastly attempt at dignity. "You speak wildly, my poor friend."

"I am not your friend," retorted Youle heatedly. "I have no respect for you. And as regards this marriage, it will never take place."

"It must," breathed Parsons, looking whiter than ever. "You must not attempt to interfere."

"I shall interfere to some purpose," said Youle angrily. "I was going to South America, but now I shall postpone the journey until I learn the truth about the murder."

"You never will—the police have failed."

"I shall not fail. Already I have a clue, and——"

"What clue—what clue?"

"That I decline to tell you; but rest assured that the man who killed Mrs. Ainsleigh shall hang," and with a gloomy nod Youle passed through the gates. A backward glance revealed Parsons staring after him in a state of dismay and doubt. Apparently he was by no means pleased to think that so resolute a man as Youle should search out the matter of the murder.

Mrs. Push was a plump, bright-eyed little widow, who had an eye for a handsome man, and who therefore greatly admired Youle. She waited on him at dinner that night herself, and chatted the while. Harold permitted her to do so for two reasons: one was that she had known him since as a boy he visited at the Grange, and the other was that he fancied he might learn something pertinent to the matter in hand from her chatter. She might have seen the mysterious Captain Orlando;

she might explain the behaviour of Old Barnacles, and, since Gilbert had stopped at the inn, she might tell Youle more about him than Mr. Ainsleigh would choose to have known. And this she did, touching on a topic which Youle had forgotten.

"I never did like Mr. Ainsleigh," chatted the plump landlady, when Harold was sipping his coffee. "Old Madam was foolish to marry him."

"It was a love-match, Mrs. Push."

The landlady tossed her head. "Folks may call it so, Mr. Harold"—so she called Youle, remembering his boyhood—"but it's my opinion that he loves no one but himself—and perhaps another woman," she added.

"Another woman?" Harold suddenly thought of Mrs. Brady, and wondered why he had forgotten to tell Alix that Ainsleigh was practically engaged to that lady.

"Of course, I have no right to say anything, and I wouldn't say it to anyone but you, Master Harold. But old Madam is now in her vault, poor soul, so no harm can come of my saying that Mr. Ainsleigh met here a very fine lady—yes, he did, look as you may, Master Harold. And he met her on the very Sunday when his poor wife was killed."

"What was the lady's name?" asked Youle quickly.

"I can't tell you that, sir," said Mrs. Push. "I tried to find out, but she was too clever for me. She drove over here on that Sunday afternoon in a motor-car from Gravesend—about five o'clock it was. Mr. Ainsleigh, who looked very ill——"

"The drug," murmured Youle. "Go on, Mrs. Push."

"Well, he was evidently watching for her, for he was having drinks here for an hour before she came. He helped her down and took her into the parlour—yes, into this very room, Master Harold. There they talked

for quite an hour. Then the lady went away in the car, and Mr. Ainsleigh returned to the Grange with a parcel."

"What kind of a parcel?"

"It was done up in brown paper. I don't know what it was. I expect the lady brought it, as he had no parcel when he was waiting."

"Humph!" said Harold, wondering what the parcel contained, but not attaching much importance to it. "Can you describe the lady?"

"I didn't see her face, Master Harold, as she wore a very thick veil, which didn't make me think any the more of her, I can tell you. What right had a married man like Mr. Ainsleigh to meet a strange lady secretly, as you might say, when his lawful wife was crying her heart out at home? Oh, I know well Mr. Ainsleigh was wicked to old Madam. I know a great deal that goes on, I can tell you, Master Harold."

Harold passed this speech over. "Was the lady tall?"

"Tall, and with a fine figure—rather stout, too. Beautifully dressed and with a rich, soft voice. Her hair was black, and I think she was older than she looked, as there was dye on her hair. And she had bright eyes, too," babbled Mrs. Push, "for I saw them sparkling through her veil, and—— What's the matter?" she broke off as the waiter looked in at the door.

"Beg pardon, mum, but that boy Tuckle wants to see Mr. Youle."

"Will you see him?" asked the landlady, looking at her guest.

"Oh, yes," replied Youle, wondering why the boy had come. "Perhaps he may have a message for me from Miss Parsons."

"Bless her heart," said Mrs. Push, and walked out to send in Tuckle.

While waiting, Harold rapidly turned over in his mind what she had said. Without doubt, from the vivid description given by the landlady, it was Mrs. Brady who had called at the inn, and who had given a parcel to Gilbert Ainsleigh. And on the very day of the murder, too. Why had she come? What were the contents of the parcel? Before Harold could find an answer to these questions, Tuckle, smartly dressed and with a flower in his buttonhole, appeared.

"What's the matter?" asked Youle when the door was closed.

"I've come to see you," said the lad coolly.

"With a message from Dr. Parsons?"

"No, sir. I never gave him your message."

"Why didn't you?"

"Because—well, sir, I've come to tell you that."

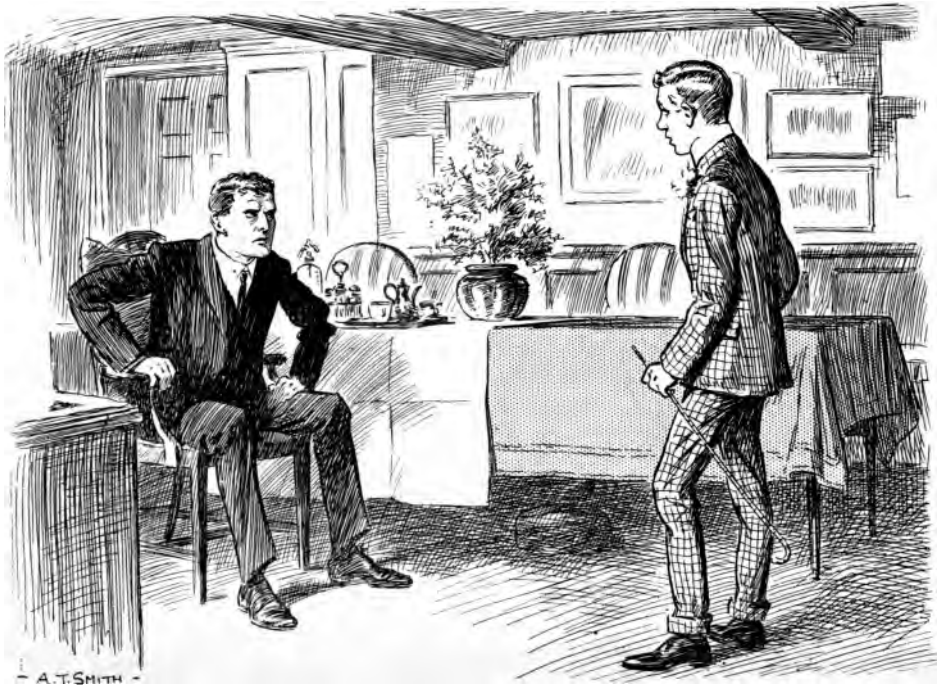
Tuckle looked so cunning as he spoke that Youle longed to box his ears. But apparently he had something important to say, since he was swelling his little body like that of the frog in the fable. Harold nodded assent, thinking that he might learn something helpful regarding the murder. Tuckle was so shrewd a lad that he well might have taken note of some circumstances likely to have escaped the dull country servants who formed the Grange establishment.

"Well?"

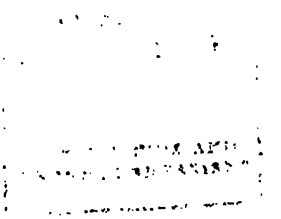
"I want money, sir," said Tuckle, slapping his leg with a smart cane.

"Why do you come to me for it?" demanded Youle sharply.

"I don't come to you exactly, sir. It's that thousand pounds I want you to help me to get."



"'DR. PARSONS KILLED HER,' REPLIED TUCKLE, COOLLY, 'AND I CAN PROVE IT'" (*p. 129*).



"Do you mean the reward for the detection of Mrs. Ainsleigh's assassin?"

Tuckle nodded. "I can earn it," he declared, leering.

Harold, who had been lounging back in a comfortable chair, looked up and sat up with great vivacity. "Do you mean to say that——"

"That I know who killed missus? Yes, I do, sir."

"Why didn't you say so at the inquest?"

"I wasn't certain. And," added the boy with a grin, "there wasn't no money offered."

"Oh, you waited for that, did you?"

"In part, sir; but I wasn't quite certain. Now I am, and I've come to tell you, if you'll promise to get me the thousand pounds."

"Miss Parsons offers that reward. Why not tell her?"

Tuckle leered again, and looked more cunning than ever. "She wouldn't like it, Mr. Youle—not she."

"I don't understand your meaning."

"Promise me that I'll get the thousand pounds, and I'll tell you, sir."

"If you can tell me the name of the man who murdered Mrs. Ainsleigh I can certainly promise that you will get the reward. Miss Parsons wishes to learn who killed her friend."

"She'll be sorry when she does, sir, and then mightn't pay the money; so that's why I come to you, Mr. Youle."

"Come to the point," commanded Harold sharply, and with a vague feeling of uneasiness. "You shall have the money as soon as the murderer is convicted. Now, who killed Mrs. Ainsleigh?"

"Dr. Parsons killed her," said Tuckle coolly, "and I can prove it."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE MISSING RING.

"YOU young liar," said Harold, after a moment's pause of sheer astonishment. "You made this story of the doctor's guilt up out of your head, so as to get the reward."

"Well, sir," replied Tuckle insolently, "if it ain't true I don't get the reward—see?"

Youle took the boy by the shoulders and looked into his sharp grey eyes. Tuckle met the young man's look fairly and squarely. Whatever trickery he might be up to, Harold judged that the boy was fully persuaded of Parsons' guilt. He neither cast down his eyes nor reddened, but met Youle's gaze with the innocent look of a cherub. After a minute Youle pushed the lad roughly into a chair, and sat down opposite to him, with his eyes on his face. "Tell me all about it."

"Wouldn't it be better to tell the police, sir?" said Tuckle significantly, and leering again. "I might get the reward quicker."

"You won't get it at all, unless you tell me everything."

"Oh, my eye, what a jolly shame! But I think, Mr. Youle, that the young missus would give more than a thousand pounds for me to hold my tongue, sir."

"You're a blackmailer in embryo, Tuckle. Go on. On what grounds do you accuse Dr. Parsons?"

"The dead missus was killed at half-past nine, sir."

Harold nodded, remembering how he had heard the

clock strike while he was trying to open the door. "Half-past nine," he admitted.

"And Dr. Parsons was then supposed to be in the billiard-room, sir?"

"He *was* in the billiard-room. Miss Parsons and myself heard him knocking the balls about when we went into the garden."

"Oh, yes, sir, he was there right enough then," went on Tuckle, leering impudently; "both before and after the murder he was there, so as he'd have an excuse when questions were asked. But he left the billiard-room to strangle the dead missus, and asked me to get his cigar-holder, so as to make it right."

"If I remember rightly," said Harold, recalling the conversation he had with this imp immediately after the committal of the crime, "he asked you to get the cigar-holder at twenty minutes past nine?"

"You might say a quarter-past, sir. I mistook the time by five minutes, as I was looking for the cigar-cutter"

"Well, let us say a quarter-past nine. Mrs. Ainsleigh was killed at half-past. I met you at twenty to ten. In the interval, so you say, Dr. Parsons murdered your mistress."

"He did, sir. 'Twasn't a long time, sir. But say he had the monk's dress in the billiard-room: all the servants were at supper in the hall, so all Dr. Parsons had to do was to slip on the dress immediately I went for the cigar-cutter at a quarter-past nine. He got to the parlour say at twenty-five past, and killed the missus at half-past."

"Humph! It is not improbable. Miss Parsons and myself saw the struggle taking place some five minutes before the half-hour. Well?"

"Well, then, sir, he locked the door on you, slipped down to the billiard-room, and was knocking the balls about once more when I met you on the stairs at twenty to ten."

"But the dress—how could he dispose of the dress meanwhile?"

"I believe he shoved that outside the window of the billiard-room, and when you set him to watch Mr. Ainsleigh sleeping, sir, he could come back and get it. Then he hid it up a tree. It was found up a tree, if you remember, sir."

"Yes. But this is all theory, Tuckle. You might have explained it at the inquest."

"I wasn't sure, sir."

"And why are you sure now?"

Tuckle fumbled in his pocket and brought out a small gold cross. "Do you know that, sir?"

Harold inspected it closely. "I think the doctor wore some such cross at his watch-chain."

"He hasn't got it now, sir. I found that in the room, when you set me to watch the body of dead missus. It must have been torn off in the struggle."

"Wait a moment," said Youle coolly. "Dr. Parsons —as you say—wore a monk's dress to commit the crime. Therefore the dead woman could not have torn off this cross if it hung on his watch-chain."

"The dress might have been open at the breast, sir. And you saw that the struggle was a long one."

"True!" Harold thought for a moment. "Why didn't you state this at the inquest?"

"I wasn't sure who wore the cross, sir, as I didn't remember seeing it on Dr. Parsons' watch-chain. Then the day after the murder, he said he had lost the cross. Then I made sure that he was guilty."

"If guilty he would scarcely ask after the cross."

"He perhaps didn't know where he dropped it, sir. But he did in the parlour, when he killed the missus."

"Tuckle, you learned that the cross belonged to Dr. Parsons before the inquest, as you acknowledged just now."

"Yes, sir," admitted the lad calmly, "but there weren't no reward offered. You see, sir, I want to marry," and Tuckle threw back his spare shoulders with the air of a conquering Don Juan.

"At your age?" asked Harold sceptically.

"She's called Julianna Smithers," said Tuckle seriously; "a fine woman of thirty, sir, and she lives at Pitsea."

"And you are fifteen. Crabbed age and youth indeed, Tuckle."

The boy looked sulky, not liking the chaff. "She and me love one another, Mr. Youle, and age ain't got nothing to do with it. I'm tired of service, so I thought if I could get money I'd marry Julianna and start a fried-fish shop near mother's, in Whitechapel. That's why I waited till a reward was offered, and if you won't give it to me I'll go to the police."

Harold saw that prompt measures must be taken with this precocious youth, and walked to the door. "Go," said he, throwing it open, "and I'll see that you don't get one shilling."

Tuckle's jaw fell. "Miss Parsons promised one thousand pounds if the murderer was found," he whimpered.

"But not if the murderer proved to be her father. Well, will you go to Inspector Unwin, or wait till I arrange the matter?"

Tuckle sat down again promptly. Harold's firmness

had a great effect on him. "I'll wait for you, Mr. Youle."

"Very good. Now the theory you put forward as to Dr. Parsons murdering Mrs. Ainsleigh is plausible, but it won't hold water. To commit the crime Dr. Parsons must have been very expeditious indeed, and in my opinion he is too old and indolent a man to move with such rapidity. Then, if he lost the cross during the struggle, he must have guessed as much, and therefore would not inquire about it. I shall turn the matter over in my mind, and meanwhile you can hold your tongue."

"For how long, sir?" inquired the boy gloomily.

"For as long as I please. I am returning to town, and——"

"Won't you run the doctor in first, sir?"

"No. At present, if guilty, he has no idea that he is suspected by you or anyone. Therefore, he will not run away. I have to see someone in town regarding the case, and when I return in a few days I'll see what the doctor has to say."

"He'll lie."

"Perhaps you have lied, also, Tuckle. I don't trust you."

"And this is what a cove gets for being honest," grumbled the injured boy. "Oh, my eye, what's the use of being good?"

"Good, when you are trying to hang a man on insufficient evidence just because you want money; also," added Harold, "you would get into trouble if you went to Unwin, for not having made this statement at the inquest. On the whole, Tuckle, you had better let me arrange the matter. It will be the best for you in the long run. And you needn't tell your thirty-year-old flame that you anticipate setting her up in a fried-fish

shop, as I am by no means sure that you will get the money."

"I'll hold my tongue, sir, but I call it very hard——"

"Shut up, you imp," said Youle sharply. "You say this Julianna lives at Pitsea. How, then, did you come to meet her?"

"She's servant to an old lady called Mrs. Bendeavour, sir. Mr. Ainsleigh sent me there several times with messages to the old lady, and there I saw Julianna."

"What were the messages?"

"I don't know—they were letters. Why do you ask, sir?"

"Never mind," Harold pointed to the door; "you can go now, and mind you hold your tongue, or I'll make things extremely hot for you. I shall take charge of this," continued Youle, and slipped the cross into his pocket.

"Oh, my eyes," said the disgusted Tuckle, seeing that he had made a mistake. "I wish I'd gone to the police, I do."

"If you had, you would now be in gaol."

"I wouldn't!"

"Clear out, and don't be insolent."

Tuckle shuffled with his feet, and drew his sleeve across two tearful eyes. He seemed disposed to howl, but a look at Youle's firm and slightly angry face made him change his mind. He departed, muttering something about the fried-fish shop and Julianna, and being tricked out of his lawful gains. When the door closed Harold finished his now cold coffee, lighted a cigar, and thought over what he had been told.

He was more impressed by Tuckle's information than he chose to admit, and therefore had bluffed the boy into thinking that the discovery of the gold cross

was valueless. But Youle thought there was a good deal of truth in the statements of the page. The cross —he took it out and examined it again—undoubtedly belonged to Parsons, and the doctor could easily have accomplished the crime in the way suggested by the ingenious Tuckle. Youle knew now why Alix was marrying Gilbert Ainsleigh. That gentleman had, in some way—perhaps from the page—learned that Parsons was guilty, and so had threatened to have him arrested unless Alix consented to a disgraceful marriage. Hence she had been compelled to throw over Youle and agree to take Ainsleigh as her husband. And for this reason, also, did she refuse to explain, as she could not do so without incriminating her father. Finally, Harold remembered how disturbed Alix had seemed when she had met Parsons immediately after the committal of the crime, and how she had fled for some minutes to her room. "She suspected him even then," muttered Youle, pacing the room. "Humph! I expect Parsons learned that the will was made in his daughter's favour, and killed Mrs. Ainsleigh so that the money should come to Alix. Ainsleigh has found this out in some way, and hence has terrorised Alix into the marriage to save her father from being hanged."

This was one way of looking at it; but there was also another. Ainsleigh might have induced the doctor to commit the crime, and the marriage might have been arranged beforehand without the knowledge of Alix. Harold remembered how Parsons had always been against the match with himself, and fancied that he wished Alix to marry Ainsleigh and put all chance of Gilbert's betraying him out of the question. The way to discover the truth was to break off the marriage. Alix would not do that, since her father's life depended

upon his consent; but Mrs. Brady might make Gilbert surrender the girl. Mrs. Brady was undoubtedly in love with Gilbert, and would not tamely give him up. Then again, she had been with Gilbert at this very inn on the day of the murder. What was she doing there?

"I'll go up and see Mrs. Brady to-morrow, and before I interview Parsons," soliloquised Youle, as he turned in that night. "Alix apparently has not spoken to her father about the engagement with Ainsleigh, but the old man guesses it, from his remark about the price to be paid—the price of Ainsleigh's silence, evidently. If I tell Mrs. Brady that Ainsleigh is to marry Alix, she will certainly cut up rough, and perhaps may say why she came to the 'Blastorne Arms.' Humph! I wonder what will be the end of all this?" And he fell asleep trying to answer his own question.

People travel nowadays with the rapidity of the genii in the Arabian tales. By noon next day Harold presented himself at Mrs. Brady's house, and was shown into the library. While waiting he beguiled the time in strolling round the room, looking at the various photographs and playbills on the walls, all of which represented the triumphant theatrical career of Mrs. Brady. In ten minutes he heard the door open, and turned to greet his hostess; but the new-comer proved to be Gilbert Ainsleigh, who did not seem pleased to see the young man. He looked thoroughly healthy, and there was no sign of indulgence in morphia about him. Harold thought what a fine animal he was, as he moved forward with a forced smile, but without holding out his hand.

"Hullo, Youle; you here?" he said, looking at the visitor with hawk's eyes, and very steadily.

"Yes. I have come to luncheon with Mrs. Brady, She is an old friend of mine."

"I know. She has often spoken to me about you. I am just going off myself. Have you been at the Grange lately?"

Harold was about to say that he had just come up, and furthermore, felt inclined to ask Gilbert what he meant by forcing Alix into marriage with him, when he was paying attentions to Mrs. Brady. But this he did not do, although it was on the tip of his tongue to speak out. He felt instinctively that if he said a word, Ainsleigh would be placed on his guard, and, moreover, he judged it better to have the matter thrashed out with Mrs. Brady before bringing the scamp on the scene. "I have not been there for some time," said he carelessly, and forced himself to tell a diplomatic lie, although he did not care to do so.

"I hear Miss Parsons is well, and that the doctor is digging his grave with his teeth," said Ainsleigh, still observant. "I stopped at the 'Blastorne Arms' for a few days, and saw them for an hour or so. You are not jealous, I hope?" he added, laughing affectedly.

"By no means," responded Youle coolly; "I trust Miss Parsons in every way. She is thoroughly devoted to me."

"Oh, yes, of course." Ainsleigh choked back another laugh, and stretched out his hand. "Good-bye, I'll see you again soon, I hope."

"I hope so. I am glad to see you looking so well. Have you——?"

"Yes, I have," interrupted the other quickly. "I have not touched the drug since the death of my poor wife. Good-bye!" He seemed anxious to get away, and still held out his right hand.

Youle had to take it, although he did not care to do so, guessing what a scamp the man was, although he had no reason to think he was guilty of murder. "What have you done with the ring I gave you?" asked Youle suddenly, and noting that it was not on Ainsleigh's little finger as usual.

"I lost it," said Gilbert, quickly withdrawing his hand. "I can't say where. In the confusion about the Grange after my poor wife's death I must have taken it off, and mislaid it. At all events, it is gone. Such a nuisance, since the stone was unique. Will you give me another stone, since you are the only person who has this particular gem, if it can be called so?"

"I'll think it over," said Harold gravely, and quite accepted Ainsleigh's explanation. It was possible that in the confusion he had lost the ring, and the inquiry made by Youle was merely done for the sake of talking. It was so difficult to speak to Gilbert about ordinary things, seeing that Harold wished with all his heart to tax him with complicity in the murder.

Gilbert nodded, and went out whistling. Harold looked after him with disgust, as he remembered that the man's wife had been dead only a couple of months. Then he turned to the first play-bill he saw, and read it mechanically. It proved to be that of a poetic drama, *The Monk's Love*, and amongst the characters was one—the hero—a Cistercian monk. Harold stared. He remembered that the disguise of the murderer was the white dress of a Cistercian monk. And Mrs. Brady had brought a parcel to the inn.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE PHOTOGRAPH.

HAROLD, staring on the old play-bill, did not hear the door open, for his brain was trying to work out the connection between the hero of the play and the presumed ghost who had murdered Mrs. Ainsleigh. He remembered how he had conjectured that that dress might be from a theatrical wardrobe, and here on the bill he found evidence that it might be so. And Mrs. Brady! What had she to do with the matter? Why had she come to the "Blastorne Arms" to meet Gilbert? On the impulse of the moment he turned to face her, inquiringly.

"When was this play produced?" he asked quickly.

Mrs. Brady looked rather surprised at his vehemence, and cast a glance at the play-bill. She started when she saw the title, but years of training on the stage enabled her to master a momentary emotion. "I think two years ago," she said, coming closer; then ran a white finger along the glass under which the play-bill was framed. "Here is the date—two years and six months ago. It was one of the last plays I produced—a very fine piece. The blank verse was exceptionally good. The author died young, poor boy; such a pity, as he would have done great things. I wonder you did not see the play. It was the talk of London."

"I was in Africa at the time, Mrs. Brady"; he hesitated, not wishing to be too explicit, as he did not know how far he could venture without arousing her sus-

picions, if, indeed, she had anything to do with the matter he had in his mind. "I see the hero was a Cistercian monk."

"*Is* a Cistercian monk," corrected Mrs. Brady, calmly; "plays never grow old in my mind. Yes. It is a fine part, and the dress is very picturesque. One scene was a monastery, and we had fifty monks on the stage all in white. Why do you ask?"

"I was thinking of the monk's ghost at the Grange."

"The Grange! Oh, yes; you mean the place where poor Mr. Ainsleigh's wife died."

"Poor Mrs. Ainsleigh, I think. She was murdered by a ghost—the ghost of a Cistercian prior."

"Ridiculous! As though ghosts could strangle anyone! I remember—the police had a theory that the assassin masqueraded as a ghost."

Harold bowed his head. "I think the theory is a correct one. It is strange," he added, with his eyes on Mrs. Brady, "that the monks in your play should be Cistercian also."

She stared. "I fail to see the connection. All the same, there *is* a connection."

"What do you mean?"

"The author of the play was a *protégé* of the late Mrs. Ainsleigh; Miss Blastorne she was then. He stopped at the Grange and heard the legend. I believe he took the idea of the play from the ghost." She looked at him keenly. "But I really don't know why you are talking like this," she added.

Youle laughed, and strove to quieten the suspicions which she undoubtedly entertained. "The murder keeps running in my head," he said in a careless way. "Mrs. Ainsleigh was a very dear friend of mine, and the circumstances of her murder are so peculiar, being

a mixture of the natural and supernatural, that I can't get them out of my mind. I recall the Cistercian ghost at the Grange whenever I set eyes on this bill."

"It is natural, I suppose," said Mrs. Brady, and rubbed her plump hands together; "but I wish you would not talk of these horrors. Did you meet Gilbert?" she asked, sitting down.

"He was in here for a few minutes. By the way, I hope you do not mind my asking myself to luncheon."

"Not at all, you are always welcome. But I notice, my dear boy," she laid a be-ringed hand on his shoulder, "that you do not look well."

"Can you expect me to, when the girl I am engaged to marry has thrown me over for someone else?"

"Miss Parsons?" Mrs. Brady sat up on the sofa on which she had sat down, and her face grew hard. "Do you mean to say that she——"

"Yes, and not of her own free will either."

"I don't exactly know what you mean?"

Harold shrugged his shoulders. "The explanation is easy. After I left you the other day I returned to my rooms to find a letter from Miss Parsons, saying that our engagement was at an end."

"And her reason?"

"She declined to give one, although I went down to Blastorne to learn it, Mrs. Brady. However, she supplied me with one piece of information, which may account for her—shall I say caprice?"

"No, don't call it caprice, if, as you say, she has broken the engagement not of her own free will. Well, and the reason?"

"She is engaged to another man."

Mrs. Brady gave an artificial laugh, and her face grew still more hard as she grasped Harold's hand.

"She has lost no time in being on with the new love. And the man's name?"

"I think you can guess," said Youle, bluntly.

Her face lighted up fiercely. "Don't tell me that Gilbert——"

"But I do. Miss Parsons stated that she was about to marry Ainsleigh. So you see, Mrs. Brady, that he will get his former fortune again with a younger wife."

Mrs. Brady was a born actress, and, stung by the implied slight, her histrionic powers asserted themselves. The situation was too good to lose, although, to do the woman justice, she was in deadly earnest. But acting had become a second nature with her.

"He deserts me," she hissed, literally hissed in the most approved fashion of the penny novelist; "me—who love him."

"I did not gather at our last interview that you did," said Harold, admiring her graceful and powerful gestures as she took the stage, or, in other words, swept up and down the room.

"Love him—of course I love him. I adore him—I worship him, and yet I know, as you do, that he is not a good man."

"I think he is a scamp of the worst, and you can tell him so. Do you mean to say that he proposed to you?"

"He would have proposed had I let him."

"Ah, then! as you were not certain of your own mind, he evidently grew weary waiting."

"It was all but settled," said Mrs. Brady, her face darkening; "but he is not going to throw me over like this. I did not have a happy life with my first husband, but with Gilbert——"

"You would have had one still more unhappy," inter-

rupted Youle; "he is a fortune-hunter, if nothing worse."

"What do you mean by—if nothing worse?"

"I decline to say."

"If you mean that he murdered his first wife you are wrong," cried Mrs. Brady rapidly; "why should he do so and lose the money?"

"Humph! The money has come into the possession of a younger and more beautiful woman, whom he intends to marry."

"And you will allow him to marry her?"

"I don't see how I can prevent her doing as she pleases," said Harold, playing his fish. "I have no power over her save that of love, and to love, for some reason connected with Ainsleigh, she will not respond. Therefore I came to you, thinking you might make Ainsleigh break this preposterous engagement."

"Of course I shall," cried Mrs. Brady, her face colouring and her bosom heaving; "he is pledged to me. He gave me to understand plainly that he would marry me, should his wife die."

"Oh, then he paid you attentions before Mrs. Ainsleigh was murdered?"

"Don't harp on that, Youle," cried Mrs. Brady fiercely; "that murder is getting on my nerves. Yes, he did pay me attentions, and I laughed at him. That was two years ago. Then he became piqued, and married Miss Blastorne. When it was too late I knew that I loved him." She struck her hands together theatrically. "We parted for a time. He came and saw me again, and I again fell under the spell of his voice. He was married then. When Mrs. Ainsleigh was—well, when she died—he came back, and it was understood that when I said the word, he would ask me to be his

wife. Only to-day he spoke—he looked—oh!"—she broke off, stamping her foot—"the man is a villain."

"I agree with you, and what such an intellectual woman as you can see in that very fine animal I fail to understand."

"Because I am a fool," said Mrs. Brady fiercely. "All women are fools when they love. I could have married many clever and wealthy men. I could do so now in spite of my years; but for some reason I fell in love with Ainsleigh. He is an animal, as you say, a magnificent animal, and yet—and yet"—she struck her breast three or four times—"I love him—I adore him—I—oh, what fools we women are! But he shall not cast me aside. Cast me—me who have had the town at my feet. I'll see that he does not marry this pale-faced, puny——"

"Stop!" Harold rose quickly. "Remember you speak of the girl whom I love, Mrs. Brady."

"She must be worthy of your love to desert you," she sneered.

"I believe she is being coerced——"

"By Ainsleigh? Well"—she gave a hard laugh—"he shall be coerced also. I'll see him this afternoon, and make him surrender this girl."

"You won't find that easy. Ainsleigh has the obstinacy of a mule."

Mrs. Brady laughed in an evil manner. "I can manage him. Never fear."

"Do you mean to say that——"

"I mean to say nothing." She went towards the door and wrenched it open. "I can't ask you to stay to luncheon now. I am all broken up with this news. But rest assured that this marriage will never, never take place, Youle."

Harold sprang forward as she was leaving the room. "I insist upon knowing how you intend to stop the marriage," he said energetically.

Mrs. Brady shook him off. She looked double her age, and her fine face was suddenly wrinkled as though by magic. Even her stately figure seemed to dwindle and shrink. "I shall say nothing," she said, between her teeth, and theatrical to the last, "until," she looked at the young man significantly, "until the time comes."

It was no use detaining her, as she certainly could not be forced to speak. Already Harold had learned the obstinacy of women, from his interview with Alix Parsons. He therefore held the door open for her to depart. Mrs. Brady placed her hand on her heart, heaved a sigh, cast on her visitor an unutterable look of woe, and made a most effective exit, which, had it been on the stage, would have brought down the curtain amidst thunders of applause. The one member of a possible audience who witnessed the performance shrugged his shoulder, and went to pick up his hat. Mrs. Brady's assumption of a heartbroken woman was too obvious to be enjoyable.

Youle began to think, and with good reason, that in some way Mrs. Brady was connected with the death of Mrs. Ainsleigh. She wanted to marry Gilbert, with whom she had apparently coquetted before his marriage. What was more likely than that she should wish the elderly wife out of the way? If so, the question was, would she be prepared to commit a crime to gain her wish? And if she was so prepared, had she joined forces with Ainsleigh to make Parsons strangle the old lady? Evidently she knew how to intimidate Gilbert, or she would scarcely be so certain that the match with Alix would be broken off. This pointed to some know-

ledge on her part of Gilbert's complicity in the death of his wife. But if Mrs. Brady was mixed up with the matter, Gilbert would be able to defy her, since she could not denounce him unless she denounced herself. Harold half-regretted that he had not accused Mrs. Brady of having been at the "Blastorne Arms" on the day of the committal of the crime. But, on the whole, he decided that he had done right in withholding his knowledge on this point. Mrs. Brady was a wonderfully clever woman, and would be perfectly well able to wriggle herself free, unless he possessed such intelligence as would prove her presence at the inn. Youle decided to let Mrs. Brady fight the matter out with Gilbert, and then if the marriage with Alix did not take place, Dr. Parsons, if guilty, would be betrayed by the person—presumably Ainsleigh—who wished the daughter to pay the price of the father's safety.

"But I'll go and see Tony," said Youle, as he left the bijou house, without his luncheon; "he may be able to tell me where his mother was two months ago."

It seemed rather shabby, to make the boy talk about his mother and practically betray her, but Youle was too much bent upon discovering the truth and regaining his beloved to waste much time in consideration of minor details or nice points of conscience. He jumped into a hansom, and drove to Bloomsbury, where Tony had a studio. The young artist was within doors drawing a picture for some sea story in a magazine. He met Harold with dishevelled hair and an eager look on his round boyish face.

"Come in, old chap," he said, shutting the door; "it's not everyone I would see, but you're an exception. I'm hard at work, illustrating 'The Captain's Child.' It's running in the *Trafalgar Magazine*, and is all

stood in the middle of the group of officers. He was a tall man with a beard, and beside him stood a short figure. It was really this last which attracted Youle's gaze, as the man was undoubtedly Old Barnacles. He looked a trifle younger, and the photograph was sufficiently bad; all the same, there was a glimmer of Old Barnacles' look about the features. And the captain with the beard—was there a scar? Youle could not see one, as the faces were so minute. But with a beating heart he put a careless question to the artist: "Captain Rug you call this chap in the centre?"

"Yes, ugly old chap, ain't he? And his face isn't improved by a scar on the right temple."

"A scar?" Harold nearly jumped.

"Yes. He got it from pirates in the China seas. To think that a lovely girl like Mary Jane should have such a rusty father."

"Captain Rug, of Pitsea."

"Yes, yes," said Tony impatiently; "if you don't believe me, look on the back of the photo. There's a list of officers and men there."

Harold turned over the photograph. There in faded ink he read the name of Captain Orlando Rug. His search was at an end. Old Barnacles *did* know the mysterious visitor to Mrs. Ainsleigh. Orlando Rug was his strange name. Was Orlando Rug the criminal after all?

"'AND HIS FACE ISN'T IMPROVED BY A SCAR ON THE RIGHT TEMPLE'" (*p. 150*).

CHAPTER XV.

CAPTAIN RUG.

A SILENCE ensued between Tony and his visitor. The artist became absorbed in his work, while Youle smoked quietly, and tried to sort out the unexpected information he had obtained. First he considered the movements of Mrs. Brady and her possible connection with the crime. Being in love with Ainsleigh, as she plainly confessed, she had every inducement, when spurred on by the handsome scamp, to get rid of the elderly wife. The crime had been committed by someone in the dress of a Cistercian monk representing a ghost. In the course of her theatrical career Mrs. Brady had produced a poetic drama where the hero and other characters were arrayed in such costumes. Mrs. Brady might have retained the dresses, and have taken one down to Gilbert on that fatal Sunday. Whether she knew what use he would put it to, Youle could not determine any more than he could be sure of Mrs. Brady's complicity in the crime, strong though her motive might be. But she was certainly in the neighbourhood for several hours, seeing that she had not returned until midnight to the house where she was stopping. It seemed as though she had waited to see if the crime would be consummated.

As to Captain Rug, he appeared to be connected with Old Barnacles. The names at the back of the card gave the true name of the ancient as James Peddie, but Harold, from long usage, thought of him by his nickname. Barnacles denied all knowledge of Rug, yet ap-

parently had served under him in the capacity of boatswain, as was proved by the photograph itself, and by the information given at the back of it. It was clear that Rug had called on Mrs. Ainsleigh on Monday the third of May, and had then threatened her, as appeared from the unfinished letter. On Sunday night, May the ninth, Mrs. Ainsleigh had been murdered, but there was nothing to show that Rug had repeated his visit. If he had not, then he could not be guilty. Yet, if innocent, why had he not appeared at the Grange when Mrs. Ainsleigh's death was announced in the papers? Harold did not know what relation the sailor was to the dead woman, but from the hints dropped by her he was sure that she had a relative called Orlando. Rug's name being Orlando, it naturally followed that he was the relative in question. It was possible that Old Barnacles, knowing the suspicions entertained against his former captain, had written the letter seen by Harold, warning Rug to keep away. But that letter had been written at least two months later. If not warned before then, Rug would have come to the Grange. Barnacles, therefore, was corresponding with Rug. For what purpose?

This was an impossible question to answer. Youle disbelieved that the ancient salt could not read or write, as he had seen—which he forgot to mention at the time—certain labels on plants written in shaky, crabbed handwriting, which undoubtedly was that of Old Barnacles. The man was a liar in denying that he could write, and he was also a liar in stating that Rug was a stranger to him. He was plainly in communication with the captain, and again Harold asked himself why the old sailor should be? Only one solution of the mystery suggested itself to his mind. Rug, in some way not manifested, was connected with the murder, and dreaded

lest he should be traced. Barnacles, being on the spot, was advising him of what was taking place.

"If I could bring Barnacles and Rug together in the same room with myself," thought Youle at this point of his meditations, "I might be able to get at the truth. Mrs. Brady had a motive to commit the crime, and was in the neighbourhood. Orlando Rug threatened the dead woman, but evidently did not return to Blastorne on the fatal Sunday. The inference points to Mrs. Brady as guilty. Her love for Gilbert, her possession of the robe, and her presence in the place on the night the crime was committed. I must confess that things look black against the lady, and yet Rug has something to do with the matter. Shall I follow up the Brady clue, or make immediate use of this last piece of information?"

After some moments' thought, Youle decided that he would follow the Rug clue to Pitsea, and forthwith concocted a scheme by which he hoped to force Barnacles into acknowledging that he knew Rug. To carry out his plans he would be obliged to make use of Tony, and although as an honourable gentleman he hated to act in what appeared to him to be an underhand way, yet the exigencies of the situation left him no option. Either he had to lose Alix and see her married to a man whom he knew to be a scoundrel, or he had to make use of such material as lay close at hand. Swallowing his pride, Harold accepted the latter alternative, and began operations at once.

"Tony," he said artfully, "I have some influence with your mother."

The artist wheeled round eagerly. "I know you have. Mother thinks no end of you. Do you think you could persuade her to let me marry Mary Jane?"

"That is what I am coming to, my boy. Take me down to Pitsea to see this angel of beauty." He stifled a laugh as he thought of the foolish, doll-like face, "and I'll see if she is the sort of girl your mother would take to. Then I'll do my best to make the course of your true love run smooth."

"What a good chap you are!" said Tony, so earnestly that Harold felt a pang of remorse at the thought of the part he was forced to play; "but your South American journey?"

"I have put that off for the time being," said Youle hastily; "now do not ask questions. My reasons are private. But about going to Pitsea?"

"I'll take you in a couple of days," replied Tony, after some consideration. "I must write to Mary Jane and tell her that I want to bring you down."

"Will she have to ask her father's permission?" questioned Harold. It struck him that Old Barnacles might have mentioned his name in connection with the murder, in which case Rug certainly would not wish to meet him.

"Of course she won't," cried Tony, with great scorn; "Mary Jane goes her own way. Oh, she can manage her father, I am sure. He is as weak as water, and Mary Jane rules the house."

"You also, it would seem, Tony. But this," he glanced again at the photograph which he still held, "does not look like the face of a weak man, my boy."

"He was strong enough originally, Mary Jane told me; but he got sunstroke, and it addled him a bit. Also that scar on the right temple was a deep wound which unsettled his brain."

"He is not mad, I hope?"

"Oh, no, but weak. He drinks a good deal of rum

and water, and breaks out into rages. But Mary Jane can manage him," said Tony once more, and smiled with pride at the remembrance of Mary Jane's prowess.

"Is Captain Rug well off?"

"Bless you, no. Mary Jane isn't an heiress. She and her father haven't a penny—that is," Tony corrected himself, "he has an allowance from some relative."

"Do you know the name of the relative?"

"No. Rug would never say, and really I didn't bother much to ask him, as it was none of my business. But the relative only allows him a small income. He tried to get it increased the other day, but it was no go."

"What a pity for Rug! When did he try to get an increase?"

"Oh, let me see, two months ago, I think. Yes," Tony considered, "it was some time in May."

"Is the relative a woman?"

"I don't know. I can't say—that is—I say, Youle," Tony wheeled suspiciously, "why do you ask all these questions?"

"My dear fellow," rejoined Youle, with the guile of the serpent, "I must know all about Rug and his position, as well as see the girl, if I am to influence your mother in any way."

Tony accepted this excuse unsuspiciously. "Yes, of course. But mother knows Rug is poor and can't give Mary Jane money. I told her so myself. But she is an angel—Mary Jane, I mean," cried the enthusiastic Tony, "and if we live in a cottage we will be as happy as the day is long. I'd marry her without a penny."

"And that's the way you'll have to marry her unless Mrs. Brady consents," replied Youle, rising to stretch

himself; "however, let me see the lass, and I'll do my best. When can we go down?"

"In a couple of days, I tell you."

"This is Tuesday. Can we go down on Thursday?"

"Better say Friday. That will give Mary Jane a longer time to write."

"Very good, and the train?"

"The twelve o'clock from Liverpool Street. That will get us down in time for luncheon."

"No," said Youle decidedly, as he wished to take Rug by surprise, "I think we will take luncheon at the Pitsea Inn, if there is one."

"Oh, yes, a small inn of sorts. But why?"

"I wish to see Mary Jane without her telling her father that I am coming. You see, boy"—Harold took Tony in a friendly manner by the shoulders—"if Captain Rug knows that I am coming as your friend, he may influence his daughter not to see me."

"But why? Mary Jane takes her own way, I tell you. Her father can't stop our marriage even if he would. Besides, he's glad to get me as a son-in-law," said Tony, swelling with the pride of inexperienced youth.

"Captain Rug will not like a third party intervening," said Harold, making a weak excuse, for, to tell the truth, he could not think of what to say. "Better not write the young lady at all. I prefer to take her by surprise. Then I can see her as she really is."

"Oh, very well, I don't mind. But she will be what she always is—an angel."

"I am quite sure that in your eyes she is Cleopatra and Mary of Scotland rolled into one."

"Oh, yes, only more beautiful than either."

Harold laughed and patted Tony on the shoulder.

It pleased him to hear the lad's enthusiastic speeches, but he only hoped that if Tony did marry his divinity the glamour would not wear off. This ardour was too strong to last, as even lovers of the most superfine description cannot always inhabit the transcendental heaven of the wooing days. Moreover, having secured his point of not advising Rug of his coming, Harold did not need to remain. He therefore took his departure, and promised to meet Tony at Liverpool Street Station on Friday at a quarter to twelve.

"And now," said Youle to himself, when he left the studio, "what about Mrs. Brady? Shall I call again, and ask if she has seen Gilbert and had it out with him?"

On reflection, he decided that it was best to wait. If he appeared to be too eager, Mrs. Brady, being a sharp woman, might suspect his motive, and he did not wish to tell her more than was absolutely necessary. He was perfectly sure that she would stop the marriage with Alix, as, supposing all his surmises to be true, she had jeopardised her good name if not her liberty in trying to gain Ainsleigh to herself. It was best to let things move without pushing them, else they might get into a muddle, and Heaven knows the case was already muddled enough. Youle, therefore, possessed his soul in patience for the next two days, which was not easy even to a man of his strong will. He had on him what is generally known as detective fever, and was desperately anxious to solve the problem which real life had presented for his solution. Had the case of Mrs. Ainsleigh been worked into the form of a detective novel, Youle admitted that he would have looked at the last pages to know for certain who had killed her. But as the case was one dealing with real life, and he could

not turn over the pages of actual days and nights, he had to wait. And this he did with commendable patience.

All the same he was very glad when Friday arrived, and he found himself driving to Liverpool Street Station in a swift hansom. He had sent a telegram that morning to Blastorne, by which he hoped to ensnare Old Barnacles. The sending of it involved some risk, and the use of another person's name, which was wrong. But things were so desperate that Youle could not afford to stick at trifles.

Tony was waiting impatiently for his friend in a spick-and-span suit. As he shook hands Harold glanced around to see if he could espy someone he hoped to behold. But the person in question was not visible, and, indeed, it was scarcely the time for him to appear. However, Harold examined the list of trains, and decided the hour when the person in question would probably arrive at Pitsea. Having satisfied himself on this point, he joined Tony in a second-class carriage, and as the two had it all to themselves, he humoured Tony by chatting about the latter's love all the way to their destination.

"Where is the cottage?" Harold asked as they alighted at the little station.

"Myrtle Villa," said Tony gaily; "so called because there isn't a myrtle within fifty miles. It's down this road." He branched off into a side lane, and hurried on till he brought Harold face to face with a small red-brick house, built in the very ugliest style that an imaginative jerry-builder could conceive. "This is her home," said the sentimental Tony, "and there," he pointed to a badly-draped window with an exclamation of delight, "is she!"

A moment later the door opened, and a pretty girl dressed in a gaudy blouse, a much-trimmed skirt, and a hat lavishly decorated with gigantic roses, ran down the path. She was certainly pretty, but very common in dress and manner. Also, as the photograph hinted, she exhibited a simpering smile on her small face. But she had the exquisite freshness and charm of youth about her which did much to redeem her defects. Bursting with pride, Tony introduced his beloved.

"I am so pleased to meet you, Mr. Youle," said Mary Jane, trying the effect of two serviceable eyes on the handsome stranger; "any friend of dear Tony's is welcome. Won't you come in? Father is out, I am sorry to say. He went over to see Mrs. Bendeavour."

Harold started. This was the name of the lady who employed the proposed wife of Tuckle. It was a coincidence, of course, and might mean nothing. Youle rebuked himself inwardly for seeing a hare in every hedge. Nevertheless, the coupling of the two names dwelt in his memory.

Captain Rug did not appear at lunch. "Father is so odd," explained Mary Jane; "he moons about, and neglects his meals. I think he has something on his mind."

Harold thought so, too, and guessed what that something was. However, he did not impart this information to Mary Jane, and when at the conclusion of the meal she announced that she would wash up the dishes while Tony "dried" them, Harold was left alone in the parlour with an album of views. Growing weary of this, he sat by the window and watched for the coming of Rug. Shortly, as though Youle had drawn him by the power of will, a tall, bearded man with a nautical roll in his gait appeared, and entered the house. He

came into the parlour, and stared at the stranger who rose to greet him. Youle noted the scar on the right temple, noted also that Rug's eyes were dull and fishy, and that his mouth was weak and irresolute.

"I must introduce myself," said he, bowing. "My name is Harold Youle."

"Harold Youle!" repeated Rug, going as grey as a rather yellow skin would let him; "and how did you come here?"

"Tony Brady brought me."

"He had no right to," said Rug savagely, and sat down.

"I quite understand why you should say that," said Harold easily, "but you and I, Captain Rug, have to talk quietly for a few minutes."

"I don't understand."

"You will shortly! Meanwhile, I see that there is a telegraph boy at the door."

Rug stared at his cool visitor, and opened the door. After reading a telegram he returned and stared again. Harold heard the boy go away whistling, and addressed himself to Rug: "So *he* is not coming," he said, pointing to the telegram.

"Who isn't coming?" demanded Rug, uneasily and flushing.

"Old Barnacles. I wired in your name for him to come here to-day."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE UNEXPECTED HAPPENS.

"WHAT?" gasped Rug, becoming purple, and again white, "you used my name?"

Harold nodded, quite composed, and played with his watch chain. "It was the only way I could think of bringing Old Barnacles here," he remarked apologetically; "but it seems"—he again nodded towards the telegram still in Rug's hand—"that he is not coming, or else he may have arranged to join you by a later train."

Mary Jane and Tony had both stated that Captain Rug was liable to frequent fits of irresponsible rage. For the moment it seemed as though he would indulge in one now. But Youle looked very directly at him, and the man was cowed. He crushed up the telegram, and flung it into the empty grate. "I know no one called Barnacles," he stammered.

"Not by that name perhaps. But you know James Peddie."

"No, I don't," retorted Rug doggedly.

"Yes, you do," replied Youle, just as doggedly. "James Peddie was your boatswain on board the barque *Queen Anne*. Afterwards he retired from the sea, and settled in Blastorne under the protection of your cousin, the late Mrs. Ainsleigh."

"It's all lies," muttered the Captain, uneasily.

"Your manner contradicts your speech," observed

Harold drily; "if what I say is a lie, why do you get upset?"

"I ain't upset. I'm as calm as you are."

"That is not saying much," replied his provoking visitor, "for I am quite excited at the idea of learning the truth about this murder."

"What murder?"

"Mrs. Ainsleigh's, if you wish to be fully informed."

"I know nothing about it, and she is not my cousin."

"Well," said Youle leisurely, "I don't know the precise degree of relationship, but she is some connection of yours. And as to your knowing nothing about the crime, that, Captain Orlando Rug, is a lie."

Rug stuttered, and his fishy eyes became brilliant with anger. "How dare you talk to me like this?" he demanded, jumping up.

"Would you rather the police did?"

Rug dropped back into his chair as though he had been shot. "The—the police?" he stammered.

"Inspector Unwin, of Helstone, might wish to ask you questions, Captain Rug. Then there is a detective called Sparrow searching for the assassin of the late Mrs. Ainsleigh."

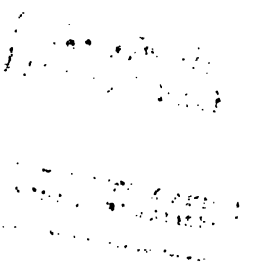
"I tell you that I am innocent." The Captain wiped his wrinkled forehead with a red silk bandana handkerchief.

"That is a somewhat different speech from your last," remarked Youle, quietly; "you said that you knew nothing about the crime: now you state that you are innocent. Well?"

"I have nothing to say."

"Pardon me. I think you have a lot to say; that is," hinted Youle significantly, "if you wish to remain at liberty."

"RUG GRASPED A CHAIR AND SWUNG IT OVER HIS HEAD" (*p. 163*).



Rug jumped up again, much agitated. "Do you mean to say——"

"That I'll have you arrested? Certainly. When a man calls on an old lady and utters threats——"

"I didn't."

"A letter left behind by Mrs. Ainsleigh says that you did. But, as I said, when a man utters threats against an old lady, and that old lady is found strangled, it naturally follows that the man who uttered those threats is suspected of committing the crime."

"You can prove nothing," gasped the Captain, and sat down again.

"Don't be too sure of that. What if I could prove that you assumed the dress of a supposed ghost—a monk's dress—and then strangled Mrs. Ainsleigh?"

"I defy you to prove that," bellowed Rug, becoming purple again, "and I order you to leave my house."

Harold rose politely. "Certainly. I always admit that an Englishman's house is his castle. But I shall return with the police."

"No, stop." The threat made Rug turn white once more. "Don't hurry; let us talk the matter over."

"No; I think it will be best for me to place the affair in the hands of the authorities."

"You will ruin me."

"Do you call hanging ruin?"

"I never said anything about hanging," snapped the Captain tremulously.

"The jury may say something."

"Leave my house—leave my house. How dare you speak so to a man of spotless character! If I were only younger I would break your head."

Rug grasped a chair and swung it over his head. Harold rose and dodged aside, just as the chair hurtled

through the air to smash a small mirror. The crash brought in Mary Jane and Tony, who beheld Captain Rug flourishing the poker with an angry face and blazing eyes. For the moment Rug was quite mad.

"Father," cried Mary Jane, snatching at the poker, "how dare you go on like this!"

"I've been insulted."

"Who insulted you? Mr. Youle?" Mary Jane looked at the young man, who stood near the fireplace quite composed, with both eyes watchful of his host's every action. "Oh, Mr. Youle," said the girl reproachfully, "to think you should upset father like this."

"Oh, I say, Youle——" began Tony, but Harold cut him short.

"Let Captain Rug explain," said Youle quietly.

"I've been insulted, and in my own house," stuttered Rug: "he said—he declared—he insulted me and—and—and—Mary Jane"—he turned fiercely on his daughter—"you'd better go back to the kitchen, and leave me to deal with the gentleman."

"No, father——"

"Get out," shouted the Captain, clenching his fist; and Mary Jane, who had hitherto been accustomed to rule because she had met with no opposition, whimpered and fled. Tony stood his ground.

"I must say, Youle——" he began again, and again was cut short, this time by his prospective father-in-law.

"You go, too," shouted Rug. "I have something to say to this gentleman—something private."

"Oh, very well," said the youth, making for the door in an injured manner; "only you've hurt Mary Jane's feelings, and I'll stand up for her if it costs me my life."

"Fool!" said Rug, and darted towards Tony, who slipped through the door and closed it cleverly enough,

so that the captain was brought up suddenly against the panels. Harold laughed.

"It reminds me of the way in which you escaped me before," he said easily, and resumed his seat.

"When? Where?" growled Rug, wiping his face.

"At the Grange, when you impersonated the ghost and——"

Rug advanced to the round table, and pressed a large thumb down on the cloth. "See here, you lubber," said he, reverting to sea-phrases, "I didn't take on with any ghost, and I didn't kill Barbara."

"Ah! You call her Barbara."

"Why not? I have the right to."

"As her cousin?"

"As a relative by marriage," announced Rug coolly. "Have some rum?"

Harold shook his head. "It will be better to conduct this conversation with due sobriety," he said; "you have a difficult quarter of an hour before you, Captain Rug."

"No, I ain't, sir, and don't you make any mistake about that. Wait till I fill up, and then we'll talk."

Rug went to the sideboard, and, producing therefrom a black bottle, filled himself a tot of rum, which he drank down undiluted. The fierce spirit seemed to brace him up. Hitherto he had been trembling, but when he again sought his seat opposite Harold his nerves were quite steady, and he talked in a quieter voice. From these frequent changes of mood, Harold guessed that the man's nervous system had been wrecked, either by drinking, or by sunstroke, or by a knowledge that he was in a dangerous position. "I am quite ready to talk," said Youle, ever mindful of the Captain's movements, for he did not trust so excitable

a creature. "I suppose you intend to make a clean breast of it?"

"I haven't got anything to make a clean breast about, Mr. Youle. I have nothing to conceal. I am an honest man"—the Captain expanded his chest, and put his large thumbs in the arm-holes of his waistcoat. "Look at me. Do I look like a murderer?"

"I don't judge by appearances, Captain."

"I've sailed the sea forty year, man and boy," went on Rug, taking no notice. "Aye, and more, for now I'm what you'd call sixty years of age. Have I made my fortune?—no, I ain't. Am I an honest man?—yes, I am. Can I clear my character?—yes, I can, and what's more, I'm a-goin' to."

Youle nodded. "Proceed."

"If you were on my ship I'd give you fifty at the gangway."

"No doubt. But at present we are talking of a more important subject than your thrashing me officially," replied Harold, with rather a bored air; "you have many good qualities, Captain Rug, but you are certainly verbose."

"Don't know what you mean," grumbled Rug. "All I say," and he brought down a heavy fist on the frail table, "all I say is, as I'm innocent of Barbara's blood. Now then——"

"Quite so; now then?" echoed Youle quietly.

"A cool hand," muttered Rug, putting his elbows on the table, and his chin in the cup of his gigantic hands; "you'll stand my friend, of course, Mr. Youle?"

"If you are innocent I assuredly shall." Youle hesitated, then, looking straight at his host, "You need a friend, then?"

Rug shivered. "Heaven help me, I do, unless I want to be hanged."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Never you mind. I'll tell you what I know, which ain't much. I have been a fool—yes, sir, a wooden fool; but don't call me a woman-killer, for no woman's the worse for my fist. Mary Jane's mother bossed me proper, and Mary Jane takes after the late Mrs. Rug. I ask you, Mr. Youle, would a sailor as is weak with the sex lay a hand on a female, save in the way of kindness?"

"Oh, hang it! Get on with your story," said Youle, impatient of this transpontine sentiment.

"Good." The Captain was not at all offended. "There ain't much to tell." He hesitated, apparently to collect his thoughts, then began all of a sudden, without further preamble. "My name is Orlando Rug, and my mother was the late Major Blastorne's second wife."

"Are you speaking of Mrs. Ainsleigh's father?"

"Yes, sir—of the late Major Blastorne, as met my mother when she was a widow, and married her on account of her prettiness. But he would not take on with me, and sent me to school. I ran away to sea, but came back to the Grange, when my mother died, which she did a year after the marriage. I met Barbara, and you mightn't believe it, but I loved Barbara."

"I see no reason to doubt it, Captain Rug. The late Mrs. Ainsleigh was a good woman."

"Too good for that blackguard she married," growled Rug.

"You know Gilbert Ainsleigh, then?"

"I know more about him than he likes," retorted the Captain; "but never you mind. His business ain't my business, or yours either if it comes to that."

"I don't know if I agree to that," said Youle drily. "I am not altogether pleased with Ainsleigh's behaviour in connection with this crime, Captain Rug."

The other looked queerly at his visitor. "I know nothing for certain, Mr. Youle, and what I do know I'm going to keep to myself. What I've to do is to clear my character."

"But——"

"I'm a-goin' to clear my character of them threats which ain't threats at all," said Rug hastily. "See here, sir: Barbara and I liked one another. It was love on my part, but not on hers. I wasn't good enough for her, as my father was just a sailor before the mast. My mother ran away with my father, he being handsome, and was of decent family. When the Major married her, he sent me away to school, as he didn't like me over much, and I didn't like him either. But I came home for a time when my mother died, and met Barbara. She would not love me as I wished, though I was a handsome chap in them days. And for why wouldn't she love me? Because she loved a dancing master, and ran away with him."

"Mrs. Ainsleigh? Never!"

"Yes, she did. It was in London. He wanted to marry her for her money, and ran away with her. I found out that the dancing master was married, and followed. I caught the two before they went far, and told what I knew. Barbara, she came back with me broken-hearted, and made me swear to hold my tongue. I did, and even her father never knew what she had done. But she wouldn't marry me even though I had saved her good name, and, of course, being a man, if not a gentleman, I said nothing, Mr. Youle. I went back to sea, and never saw her for years. Then her father

died, and she came in for the money. She wrote to me that when I retired from the sea she would give me something to live on because I had saved her good name. I knocked about for a long time, and married, and then I came home."

"Did you see Mrs. Ainsleigh often?" asked Harold, much interested.

"At times, but I always came quietly to the Grange, and no one knew what relation I was to her. I was old when we met again, and poor, too. My wife had died, and I was left to bring up Mary Jane. Barbara allowed me a small pension, but like most women, she was mean."

"That is ungrateful," said Youle hastily.

"It ain't," cried Rug doggedly; "she *was* mean, for the pension wouldn't have kept a mosquito alive. I frequently went to ask her to make it more, but she wouldn't. She was nasty, especially after she married that Mr. Ainsleigh, who is a lubber of the worst."

"What do you know about him?"

"Never you mind. It's my story I'm telling, and not his. About a week before the murder I called about the pension again, and Barbara again refused to increase it. I reminded her how I had saved her, and asked how she'd like her husband to know."

"That was the threat?" said Harold, rather disgusted.

"She called it so, but I wasn't going to tell anything. I only asked her how she'd like her husband to know. She got in a rage, and ordered me out of the house. I went, and came back here low in spirits. I never saw her again."

"Then you know nothing of the murder?"

"No, I don't. Old Barnacles wrote and told me that

a sailor chap was being asked for, and said what he'd heard about the unfinished letter. I saw that appearances were against me, so I lay low. But I never killed Barbara. Why should I, seeing that my pension stopped when she died?"

"You don't get any money now?"

"No, I don't. I'm that hard up as never was. But this Mr. Brady seems to have a rich mother, so I want Mary Jane to marry him so that she may keep her poor old father, as is"—the Captain brought his fist on the round table once more—"as is an honest man."

Before Youle could comment on this story there came a ring at the front door of the villa. From his seat Harold could not see who was there, but Rug cast a glance through the window. The Captain uttered a surprised exclamation, and rose hastily. "I wonder what's up now?" he said vaguely, and left the room. Harold sat where he was, but he listened intently. It might be that Old Barnacles had arrived. The walls of the villa were thin, and he heard the Captain open the door. Then he heard the last voice he expected to hear. On the impulse of the moment he rose and walked into the little hall. The door was open, and on the step stood Alix Parsons.

CHAPTER XVII.

FACE TO FACE.

THE estranged lovers stared at one another, while Captain Rug looked at them both with a decidedly puzzled air. Alix was the first to break an embarrassed silence. "I did not expect to find you here," she said, addressing herself to Youle.

"The surprise is mutual," he replied drily. "May I ask why you have come here, and how you learned the address of Captain Rug?"

"I think those questions concern me," snapped Rug in a blunt way. "I am in my own house, ain't I? This young lady called to see me, and not you, didn't she? Well, then——"

"There is no need to go on in this way, Rug," interrupted Youle stiffly. "I am far from claiming any right to control this lady's action, so I'll leave her with you for a time, and return to hear you finish your story."

"It's finished," said Rug sharply; "and when you leave my house, you don't set foot in it again."

"In that case I won't go out."

"Yes, you will, so——"

'Harold! Captain Rug!" Alix, who had hitherto preserved silence, now asserted herself. "There is no need to quarrel. I thought to see the Captain alone, but now that you are here, Harold, you may as well be present at the interview."

Youle looked at her keenly, then bowed and walked

back into the parlour. Alix lingered behind to exchange a word with Rug, and then followed slowly. Shortly Rug entered, and closed the door. As he did so it opened again, and Mary Jane appeared.

"Won't Miss Parsons take something to eat and drink, father?" she asked, casting a curious glance at Alix.

Rug stared. "How do you know this young lady's name?" he asked.

"Old Barnacles showed me her portrait, and then I saw her in the distance with you, Mr. Youle, when father took me down to see Old Barnacles, two——"

Rug turned on his daughter with so savage an expression that the girl recoiled. "Get out, and attend to your other guest, my girl," he said sternly. "We have business to discuss; as to what I did and where I went, hold your tongue, unless you wish to cause trouble."

"Well, I'm sure, father; to think you should talk like this to me!"

"I've been too easy with you," retorted the Captain, "and you thought you could do what you like. Sunstroke and rum, eh? Oh, yes, I know what you said to that lad in the kitchen. But I'm master here, Miss Mary Jane, so you get out."

"But the young lady——" began Mary Jane, who was by no means inclined to abandon her despotism, and who appeared very much astonished at her father's sudden assertion of himself.

"I do not want anything, thank you," said Alix impatiently. She resented Mary Jane's unasked-for kindness, and was anxious to explain to Harold and the Captain why she had come to Myrtle Villa.

Mary Jane smiled in a simpering manner, and was

about to withdraw. "I received a message from Mrs. Bendeavour, father," she declared; "she wants to see you at once."

Rug started. "Why does she want to see me?"

"I don't know; it is important. You had better go at once."

Rug turned to Alix and Youle. "I hope you will excuse me for a time," he said gloomily, and seemed much disturbed, "but I'll be back in half an hour. I have to see the housekeeper at Smallgains."

"That's all right," said Youle. "Miss Parsons and I will remain here till you return."

"Oh, but——" Alix rose nervously and began to object. Harold leaned forward and whispered—

"For your father's sake you had better remain."

Rug and his daughter, who still lingered at the door, did not hear the whisper; but Alix did, and turning alternately red and white, sat down, while the Captain, with a gloomy nod, went out. Mary Jane gave a satisfied simper, then retired. Alix stared at the closed door, and turned to Harold.

"Is that girl mad?" she asked angrily.

"Not that I know of. She is in love, I believe. Perhaps that may send her mad for the time being."

"Then why did she look at us in that idiotic way?"

"I really cannot say. But about this visit of yours——"

"And about your whisper just now?" interrupted Alix. "What do you mean by hinting at danger to my father?"

"I don't think after the remark you have made that I need explain."

"What do you mean?"

innocent, but when Gilbert spoke I knew my first thought was true."

"What made you suspect your father in the first place?"

"Some wild words he used. Mrs. Ainsleigh was angry with my father for not stopping her husband from taking morphia. Papa thought she would dismiss him, and that he would have to go back to poverty and without a practice. He said that if Mrs. Ainsleigh only died, that Gilbert would look after him and give him a pension for life, as Gilbert would get the money. He also said that it was a pity Mrs. Ainsleigh did *not* die. So you see, Harold"—she raised her eyes timidly—"that I fancied papa might have—might have—oh, it's too terrible!"

"My poor girl"—Youle laid a firm hand on one of hers, and spoke with infinite gentleness—"how you must have suffered! You should have been plain with me when we last met."

"No. I thought that you would see papa; and as Gilbert did not want him to hear about the arrangement until he spoke, I thought that there would be trouble."

"In fact, Ainsleigh has intimidated you, and made you a puppet," said Youle angrily. "I'll have a word or two with that scamp."

"Oh, Harold, think of my father. Gilbert will——"

"Gilbert won't."

Alix gasped, and clasped Youle's arm with her two hands. "Dear, do you think papa is innocent?"

"Of murder—yes. But not innocent of trying to force you into this marriage with Ainsleigh by pretending to be guilty."

"He would not run that risk if innocent, Harold."

"Yes, he would, to escape other risks," insisted Youle. "See here, Alix: I love you with all my heart and soul, but I have no manner of respect for your father. He has led—so far as I can judge—a very shady life. Gilbert Ainsleigh also is shady, and the two have many secrets in common. Gilbert may have threatened to expose Dr. Parsons in some way, unless this marriage was brought about."

"But why should Gilbert want to marry me?"

"Dear, for your sweetness and for the money. He loves you in his own way; and besides, if he made you his wife he would recover all that he has lost by the death of Mrs. Ainsleigh. Oh, he has every inducement to marry you, Alix. And your father knew well that, being in love with me and engaged to me, you would never marry Ainsleigh save for the very strongest reason. Hence he suggested that Ainsleigh should accuse him of committing the crime, knowing that you would yield rather than see him hanged. And he knows, also, that he can clear himself should Tuckle try to make capital out of the accusation."

"But if Tuckle saw——"

"I don't believe Tuckle saw anything, my dear girl. That boy is a bad lot, and quite under the thumb of Ainsleigh."

"No, no! He hates Mr. Ainsleigh."

"I tell you he is working with Ainsleigh, and that quarrel was got up so that Tuckle might be left behind to spy on you. Probably your father gave the golden cross to Tuckle or Ainsleigh so that you might be made certain of the great danger, and agree to marry Gilbert. All has turned out as was expected. You threw me over, and now are engaged to Ainsleigh."

"If my father is innocent I shall marry you, Harold.

But I cannot believe that my father would play such a trick—it is so serious."

"I can't say what Dr. Parsons wouldn't do, seeing how unscrupulous he is, Alix. I am sorry to talk about him in this way, as he is your father after all, but at the present time we must be plain if we wish to get free from these troubles. I am quite certain that your father is under Ainsleigh's thumb, and that the accusation by Tuckle and Gilbert is a pretended one. Your father is in the plot also. So long as he gets enough to live on, and his rogueries are kept secret, he will agree to sacrifice you or a dozen like you."

Alix clenched her fist, and a fire filled her eyes. "If I thought that my father would act in such a way I would never speak to him again," she said in a determined voice. "I know that my father is not a good man, but considering the troubles we have had together, I did think he had some affection for me. "Harold"—she turned to her lover—"what is to be done?"

"Nothing at present," said Youle, after a moment's pause. "Pretend to fall in with the plans of Ainsleigh and your father for the time being. I am trying to learn the truth. When I do, then we can brush away these cobweb entanglements with which we are surrounded at present."

"But if I have to marry Mr. Ainsleigh?"

"You shall never do that, I promise. You marry me." He drew her towards him, and pressed a kiss on her drooping lips. "And now that we understand one another, let me hear how you learned this address?"

But this Alix could not tell him at once. The revulsion of feeling at the thought of escaping from a hateful marriage was too much for her, and she wept bitterly. Unable to calm her, and becoming alarmed,

Harold called in Mary Jane, who appeared, followed by Tony. Mary Jane led Alix out of the room to attend to her, and Tony remained behind with his friend. He slapped Harold on the back.

"One good turn deserves another," he said jocosely. "Don't you think Mary Jane acted like a brick in getting rid of her father?"

Harold stared. "What do you mean by that, boy?"

"Why, Old Barnacles told her that you and Alix Parsons—excuse me speaking of her by her first name, but I use Mary Jane's own words—well, then, Mary Jane learned that you were engaged, and that you had quarrelled. She thought that Miss Parsons had come after you here to make it up, so contrived to get her father out of the room by inventing a message that Mrs. Bendeavour wanted him. He went out, as you saw at once, and by this time I expect you and the young lady have had an explanation. So you see," added Tony gaily, "that as you are helping Mary Jane and myself, we are helping you."

Youle did not know whether to be pleased or angry. He certainly had wished to speak alone with Alix, but also he had wished to keep Captain Rug in sight. However, Tony seemed so pleased with Mary Jane's interference that there was nothing for it but to accept the interference in the way in which it was meant. "But where did Miss Rug see Alix and myself?" he asked, remembering how the Captain had interrupted his daughter on an earlier occasion.

"Oh, when she went down to Blastorne with her father to see Old Barnacles in his cottage. You see, Old Barnacles was fond of Mary Jane when she was a little girl on her father's ship, and the Captain always

promised to take Mary Jane to see him. He did some time ago."

"Can you tell me exactly when?"

"Oh, a little over two months ago."

Harold started. "Captain Rug said that he went to the Grange to see Mrs. Ainsleigh. Was it at that time?"

"No; I think about a week later. It was on a Sunday," added Tony, after some thought, "because I came down to see Mary Jane then, and found that she had gone away to Blastorne. We had such a row over it! You can't tell what a row we had."

"Humph!" Harold thought a lot, but, like the celebrated parrot, said little. "Why did Captain Rug obey the pretended request of Mrs. Bendeavour so readily?" he asked.

"He always does. He is very thick with Mrs. Bendeavour, and Mary Jane thinks he may marry her. She is a kind of housekeeper or nurse to a lunatic sort of chap who lives at a farm called Smallgains, some distance away across the fields."

"Have you ever seen him?" Youle could not say exactly why he asked this question, save that he remembered Tuckle's future wife was maid to Mrs. Bendeavour, and considered that everything to do with Tuckle was suspicious.

"The lunatic chap? No. Nor has Mary Jane. Her father won't let her go near Smallgains, and Mrs. Bendeavour never comes here. All the courting is done at Smallgains," giggled Tony, "and I'm glad Mary Jane doesn't go near this lunatic—poor Bobby, the villagers call him. I don't know what his name is, but I believe he is a gentleman, and not a lunatic exactly either," added Mr. Brady, contradicting himself; "but he drinks or takes drugs or——"

"Takes drugs, like Ainsleigh?"

"Oh, come now, don't be hard on Ainsleigh," said Tony quickly; "he never really did take drugs. It was only a fad for the time being. But here is Miss Parsons. Are you better, Miss Parsons?"

"Thank you, yes," replied Alix, with a faint smile. "Let us walk out, Harold. The fresh air will do me good."

"But you want to see father," said Mary Jane, officiously.

"That can easily be arranged," interposed Youle before Alix could speak; "we will walk across the fields to Smallgains."

"Oh, but father won't like that," objected Mary Jane. "He never likes anyone to go to Smallgains when he is there. I have never been myself. It's a kind of private asylum, you know. Really, Mr. Youle, you shouldn't take Miss Parsons."

"Leave it to me," said Harold impatiently, and went to the door. "We will go near the place, and perhaps may see Captain Rug coming back."

Mary Jane protested again, and seemed distressed that the pair should go to the forbidden place. However, Harold overruled her objections, and she pointed out a footpath which was usually taken by her father. Along this proceeded Harold and Alix.

"And now, dear," he said, when they were some distance from the house, "let me hear why you came to Pitsea, and how."

CHAPTER XVIII.

AN ACCUSATION.

ALIX thought for one moment before replying. At length she spoke. "I shall answer your last question first," she said frankly. "I came from Blastorne to Helstone in a fly, and then took the train to Gravesend. There I crossed the river, and came on by train here. I can easily get back before dinner, so that my father will not miss me."

"Does he not know that you are here?"

"He does not. I tell my father as little as possible, Harold. After all, as I have said before frequently, he is my father, but, as you know, we do not get on well together."

"Small wonder," muttered Youle, strolling along with his hands behind his back; "and why did you come?"

"To see Captain Rug. I thought he might know of something in Mrs. Ainsleigh's past life which might account for her violent death."

"But how did you learn his address?"

"I was looking over an old desk in the library, and discovered a packet of letters addressed to Captain Orlando Rug, Myrtle Villa, Pitsea."

Harold nodded. "And, of course, you remembered the name Orlando in the unfinished letter?"

"I did, and likewise I thought that the title of captain might be that of a seaman. I decided then to

come on, both to ask Captain Rug what he had said on the occasion of that first visit to make Mrs. Ainsleigh faint, and if he knew who had killed her."

"I can answer the first question," said Youle soberly, "since Rug told me all about himself and Mrs. Ainsleigh shortly before you arrived."

Alix looked amazed. "Seeing what a dangerous position he stands in, and how he is wanted by the police, I should have thought he would hold his tongue."

"He was inclined to at first, but I managed to gain his confidence."

"What did he tell you?"

Harold detailed the story related by Rug, much to the astonishment of his companion. "He declares that he did not utter threats about revealing her dancing-master episode to Ainsleigh," said Youle; "but I rather think he did threaten her unless she increased his pension."

"What a brute!" exclaimed Alix. "No wonder he made her faint. I am glad she did not give in."

"Perhaps she intended to later on."

"No. Remember that the unfinished letter said that she despised Orlando's threats. Perhaps he killed her because she would not do what he asked."

"I thought of that myself," said Harold slowly, "especially as I gather from Tony Brady that Captain Rug brought his daughter down to Blastorne on the Sunday when the crime was committed."

"Oh, I know that," said Alix frankly.

"You know it, dear, and how?"

"Mr. Sparrow told me."

"Sparrow, the detective?"

"Yes. He came down the other day to see me, and stopped at the 'Blastorne Arms.' There he learned

in some way—from Mrs. Push, perhaps—that a sailor had been with Old Barnacles on that Sunday."

Youle protested. "That's impossible," he said decidedly; "if you remember, my dear, everyone in the neighbourhood said that no sailor had been seen. Not even the railway officials at Helstone saw Captain Rug on that day. Yet he must have escaped by the railway."

"Well, then I don't know how Mr. Sparrow found out, but he said that a sailor had been at Old Barnacles' cottage on that Sunday."

"Did he mention Rug's name?"

"No. He said that the sailor must be Orlando, but, of course, he did not know the surname. I did, having examined the letters, but I did not say anything for fear Mr. Sparrow might have Captain Rug arrested."

"If he is guilty he must be arrested," said Harold quickly.

"I quite agree with you—if he is guilty. But you can understand that after what Gilbert and Tuckle said about my father I did not want to make any trouble until I saw how things were. I had no one to help me," sighed Alix.

Harold pressed her arm. "You have me now," he murmured tenderly.

"Yes, now that we understand each other. But how did you come here, dear?"

"You will hear later," said her lover. "Meanwhile, here is the farm."

Alix looked at the quaint red-roofed building standing amidst a cluster of outhouses and stables and barns. "It is a large place," she observed; "but what a strange name—Smallgains."

"I expect the man who built it was a pessimist,"

said Youle carelessly, "and perhaps he made little off the ground. Yet it seems to be prosperous enough."

"Why did you wish to come here, Harold?"

"My dear, I find that Tuckle has been here often, and is engaged to marry a servant in this house."

"What, a boy of fifteen?"

"He has wickedness enough to be a hundred. His intended is much older—Julianna is her name, he informed me—and they intend to start a fried-fish shop when they marry."

Alix laughed, in spite of her troubled mind. "What nonsense!" she said, shrugging her shoulders; "the boy ought to be whipped. What was he doing visiting this place?"

"That is what I wish to find out," said Harold gravely. "Tuckle is, as I think, a spy of Gilbert's, and the row was arranged so that the boy might stop with you without waking any suspicions in your mind. Ainsleigh is a secretive man, and I wish to learn a few of his secrets so that I may get the better of him."

"You want to stop the marriage?"

"Of course; but I fancy that Mrs. Brady will stop that."

"Mrs. Brady?"

"The celebrated actress. She is engaged, or almost engaged, to marry Gilbert Ainsleigh."

"What?" Alix stopped short with crimson cheeks; "do you mean to say that he proposed to me while he was engaged to Mrs. Brady?"

"I do; so you can see he is a scoundrel. I expect he intended to marry Mrs. Brady for her money if he could not get you. Though to be sure, seeing what a card he had to play, he might have been sure that you

would yield rather than see your father arrested. There's something more in this Brady engagement than meets the eye. But I may learn what the secret of that is when I hear from Mrs. Brady. She is a jealous woman, and will probably make Ainsleigh uncomfortable."

"She may be very sure Mr. Ainsleigh will never be my husband," cried Alix vehemently.

Harold cast a side-long glance at her, and saw that she was furiously angry. "You don't love Ainsleigh, do you, Alix?" he asked coldly.

"You are the jealous one now," she said, smiling in spite of her hot cheeks and glittering eyes. "I hate the man; I always did, and I always shall. Only because I thought he might get my father into trouble did I become engaged to him. Now that I think my father may be innocent, and you are here, I decline to have anything to do with Mr. Ainsleigh. But no girl," added Alix emphatically, "likes to be made a fool of. Mr. Ainsleigh could never have loved me."

"I don't think he loves anyone but himself," replied Harold calmly. "He wanted you for your fortune, as he wanted Mrs. Brady, and you being the younger, he hoped to make you his wife. But now we shall see if we cannot punish him as he deserves to be punished. I expect to find out something concerning him in this house, else Tuckle would not have come here."

While speaking, Harold knocked at the door, which was closed. Alix, who lingered outside the porch, thought she saw a head at one of the casements. It vanished, and almost immediately the door was flung open to show a man standing within. At the sight of him both Alix and her lover were transfixed with

astonishment. "Ainsleigh," said the latter. "Gilbert," cried the former.

It was certainly Gilbert Ainsleigh, but not as he had been lately, bright and handsome and filled with life. Rather was it the Gilbert who had destroyed his constitution with morphia. There was the bent figure, the weak mouth, the wrinkled face, the discoloured skin, and the silly, giggling laugh. Harold could scarcely believe his eyes.

"Is your name Ainsleigh?" he demanded.

"Yes," said the other with a giggle, then looked past him towards the amazed Alix.

"Don't you know me?" demanded Alix.

"No; I never saw you before. I am——"

What he was he did not say, for at that moment he was put on one side in a gentle manner by a stout woman with a comely face, who looked much distressed. "Master Robert," said this woman, who, no doubt, was the Mrs. Bendeavour admired by Captain Rug, "how often have I told you not to go to the door? Julianna always answers the door. Go into your room, that's a dear, kind young gentleman."

"Pretty girl," said the man who had opened the door, and vanished. Mrs. Bendeavour advanced into the porch and dropped an old-fashioned curtsey. "What can I do for you, please?" she asked in a soft voice.

Harold could scarcely ask the question which was on his lips and on those of Alix. "Is that Mr. Ainsleigh?" he demanded.

"Yes," said Mrs. Bendeavour; "what do you want with him?"

"Mr. Gilbert Ainsleigh?" cried Alix, coming nearer, for a dim sense of some mistake occurred to her mind.

"Mr. Robert Ainsleigh, his brother," replied the housekeeper. "May I ask again what you want with him?"

Youle looked at Alix, and Alix looked at Youle. The discovery that Gilbert had a brother so like him astonished them greatly, and they did not know what excuse to make for what was certainly an intrusion. Mrs. Bendeavour, who seemed to be a kind, gentle old lady, began to draw herself up, and administered a rebuke.

"If curiosity has drawn you, young lady and gentleman," she said in a severe manner, "let me tell you that you cannot enter. Mr. Robert Ainsleigh is not to be seen. Please go."

"Not yet," said a voice behind the housekeeper. "Allow me, Mrs. Bendeavour, to introduce you to Miss Alix Parsons, who is to marry Mr. Gilbert Ainsleigh."

It was Captain Rug who spoke, and he fixed his eyes on Alix imperatively, apparently thinking that she would endorse his audacious statement. Alix, however, would do nothing of the kind. "I am certainly not engaged to Mr. Ainsleigh," she cried indignantly.

"Why, miss," said Mrs. Bendeavour, "Master Gilbert, as I've nursed on my knee, along with poor Master Robert, told me himself only three days ago that he was to marry you."

Harold touched the arm of Alix as she was about to reply. "So far as Mr. Ainsleigh knows," he said significantly, "Miss Parsons is engaged to marry him. But you know, Mrs. Bendeavour, that young ladies are permitted to change their minds."

"I'm sure I hope this young lady will not," said simple Mrs. Bendeavour, "for she is a pretty girl, as poor Master Robert said. But, dear me! how thought-

less I am, letting you stand without, miss. Please step in. And this gentleman," she added, nodding towards Harold.

"Mr. Youle," said Captain Rug, with another significant look at Harold. "Why did you follow me, Mr. Youle?"

"Miss Parsons wished for fresh air, and we thought we would come here."

Rug gave a short laugh, and apparently did not entirely believe this explanation. "You thought I was running away," he said coolly; "but you need have no fear. I am innocent."

"I think you are," said Youle, equally coolly; "but why did you not tell me that Ainsleigh had a brother?"

"A twin brother," supplemented Rug. "Because Mr. Ainsleigh's business is none of mine as yet. When he marries Miss Parsons it may be."

"Who told you that he was to marry Miss Parsons?"

"Old Barnacles first, and then Ainsleigh himself three days ago, when he came to see poor Bobby."

"Poor Bobby?"

"Robert Ainsleigh, if you prefer it," said Rug impatiently; "but Mrs. Bendeavour has taken Miss Parsons into the parlour. Let us follow."

"One moment," said Harold, detaining the Captain on the threshold; "it is just as well that you should know about this engagement. Miss Parsons will not marry Mr. Ainsleigh, but me."

"She was engaged to you," said the Captain, "but now——"

"Now she is still engaged. See here, Rug, I don't know what you have to do with Gilbert Ainsleigh, but he seems to me to be a villain. I believe that he knows who killed his wife. If you can get him to tell,

and if the real assassin is run to earth, you shall have one thousand pounds."

"Do you mean to say, Mr. Youle——"

"One thousand pounds," repeated Harold emphatically; "and now let us go inside."

Rug followed the young man in a dazed manner. Apparently he had not heard of the reward, and apparently also, from the excited expression which his countenance took on, he was desirous of earning the money. Harold had counted on this. The Captain, having lost his pension by the death of Barbara Ainsleigh, was poor—he would do anything for money; so if he knew the truth, he would reveal it even though it concerned the neck of Gilbert. Not that it likely would. Whatever evil Youle believed about Gilbert, he was quite confident that he had not killed his wife.

When they entered the parlour, Robert Ainsleigh, looking ill and weak, was seated on the sofa. He bowed to Harold when he entered with the courtesy of a gentleman. The man was exceedingly like his brother, especially as he had been at the time when Gilbert had indulged in morphia. Mrs. Bendeavour was coaxing Robert to go to his room, and Robert was objecting because he wished to talk to Alix. That young lady looked nervous, and beckoned to Harold that he should seat himself by her side.

"Come, dearie, do lie down, and you'll be better," coaxed the housekeeper.

"I am all right now," said Robert in a refined voice, and quite himself, so far as self-control went; "the bad fit is over. Miss Parsons will let me stop, won't you, Miss Parsons?"

"Yes," said Alix, somewhat to Harold's astonishment, and the man seated himself beside her with every

expression of delight. He did not seem to be mad, but to be rather weak-headed. While he chatted Mrs. Bendeavour went out, and speedily cake and wine were brought in by a stout maid with snappy black eyes, black hair, and a ruddy face. This, as Harold guessed, was Julianna; and he smiled to think how the pasty-faced Tuckle would mate with such a substantial personage. Also, seeing that Julianna's face was stupid, he felt quite sure that the shrewd page-boy would manage her in spite of his years. But, of course, the idea of such a marriage was ridiculous. Julianna wondered why Youle looked at her, and retired in some confusion as Mrs. Bendeavour returned. Meanwhile, Robert was chatting to Alix in a wonderfully composed manner, and Mrs. Bendeavour telegraphed her satisfaction to Captain Rug at the quietness of her charge.

"I never knew Mr. Robert so taken up with anyone," she whispered to Youle, "though I've had him by me all his poor life."

"Is he mad?" asked Harold, also in a whisper.

"No more than you are, sir, though his brother, Master Gilbert, do try to make out as he is," said Mrs. Bendeavour with great indignation.

"Why should he try to do that?" asked Harold quickly.

Mrs. Bendeavour became stiff directly. "I have served the Ainsleighs these fifty years, sir, and I don't talk about private business. Poor Master Robert would be all right, although a trifle weak in the head, if he did not take that horrible morphia."

"Does he take morphia also?"

"I don't know, sir, what you mean by 'morphia also,'" said Mrs. Bendeavour, "as no one else takes the horrid thing so far as I know. Master Gilbert gave it to

Master Robert to ease him of some pain, and since then Master Robert takes it whenever I give him the chance, which is not often, you may be sure."

While Youle digested this piece of information Robert's voice rose excitedly. "Yes, I've seen you before," he was saying to Alix.

"You can't have," she replied. "I have never been at Pitsea before."

"But I have seen you—yes, in the large house, at the high window."

"What house, what window, Mr. Ainsleigh?"

Robert's eyes wandered vaguely round the room. "I don't know," he said, passing his hand across his face. "I went a long, long way. But I saw you on the lawn; I was high up. Oh, how tired I am! Come and sing me to sleep."

"Master Robert," said Mrs. Bendeavour warningly, and advanced towards her charge as he laid a gentle hand on the wrist of Alix, "you must go to rest for a time. It is the hour for your afternoon sleep."

"I won't go. I wish to talk to this pretty girl."

"Tell him to go, miss," said the housekeeper in a soft voice; "he will obey you, I think."

Alix laid her hand on Robert's arm and looked straight into his eyes. "I want you to go and lie down, Mr. Ainsleigh," she said.

He rose at once. "I'll go if you want me, but I'll see you again—I must see you again."

"Yes, yes," replied Alix soothingly, and he went away on the arm of Mrs. Bendeavour, apparently quite contented, nodding and smiling. It was a painful sight, and Alix sighed as the door closed on the poor soul and his kindly nurse. Rug's voice broke the silence.

"'THEN PAY ME THE CHEQUE, MISS PARSONS. ROBERT AINSLEIGH STRANGLED HER'" (*p. 193*).

"It's a thousand pounds to me, if I tell you who killed Mrs. Ainsleigh?"

"Yes," said Harold, almost certain of what was coming.

"Then pay me the cheque, Miss Parsons. Robert Ainsleigh strangled her."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE CAPTAIN'S EVIDENCE.

BOTH Alix and Harold looked at Captain Rug with astonishment, and then glanced at one another. The same thought was in each of their minds. They could not be sure of the man's honesty. To gain the reward, which he needed badly, it might be that he was making what is called a "pot shot," and was willing to hang even an innocent man, provided the money went into his pocket.

"You make a very serious accusation, Captain," said Youle, when he recovered his wits. "I do not see how you can connect Robert Ainsleigh with the crime."

"If I can prove it, will you pass along the dollars?" asked Rug.

Alix shuddered. "I offered the reward, certainly," she said, "yet I do not want anyone hanged."

"If Robert Ainsleigh is guilty, he must hang," said the Captain in his bluntest manner.

"I am not so sure of that," remarked Harold quickly. "Robert is obviously weak-minded, if not entirely mad. There may be extenuating circumstances."

"Well," drawled Rug leisurely, "I ain't so sure of the circumstances, but I am sure that Robert strangled Barbara."

"For what reason?"

"You'll have to ask Gilbert that."

"Humph!" Harold thought for a few minutes.

"I guessed that Gilbert had something to do with the death. Am I right in thinking that he made use of the resemblance between himself and his unfortunate brother to bring about the death of his wife?"

"I can't say that," replied Rug.

"Then what can you say?" demanded Alix impatiently. "Tell us what you do know."

"And the reward?"

"If you can prove who killed Mrs. Ainsleigh you shall certainly be paid the reward."

"Good," grunted the Captain, and settled himself to tell what he knew. "It was this way," he continued, and was about to dash into the story when Mrs. Bendeavour returned.

"Master Robert is sleeping now," she said, addressing Alix. "Poor dear boy! Your mere presence has soothed him, miss. I never saw him take to anyone as he has taken to you. I hope you'll come down again, miss."

Alix shook her head. If what Rug said was true, she had no desire to be in the company of a murderer.

"I don't expect I'll come down here again, Mrs. Bendeavour. I came to see Captain Rug, and now that my business is over I'll go."

While the old nurse urged Alix to reconsider her decision, Youle was reflecting. If Robert was guilty he must have been at the Grange; so he thought with great reason that Mrs. Bendeavour would know of his visit. If that could be proved, it would go a long way towards substantiating Rug's coming story. To get at the truth he suddenly put a question.

"Can't you bring Mr. Robert Ainsleigh to see Miss Parsons at Blastorne?" he asked, with his eyes on the comely, placid face of Mrs. Bendeavour.

As Alix had done, the housekeeper shook her head.

"I don't like Master Robert going away," she said. "When he went last with Master Gilbert, he returned much worse than when he went."

"Oh," observed Harold idly, and certain that his sprat was catching the needed mackerel. "So Robert went with his brother?"

Mrs. Bendeavour nodded. "Yes. The last time he was away was about two months ago—perhaps a little more."

Alix uttered an exclamation, for her quick brain caught at the meaning of Harold's question. He silenced her with a look, and continued to pump the unsuspecting Mrs. Bendeavour.

"Does Robert often go away with his brother?"

"Oh, no, sir. I don't let Master Robert out of my sight unless I can help it. No one understands him as I do. But occasionally Master Gilbert has taken him to town from a Saturday to Monday."

"Saturday to Monday!" echoed Alix, recollecting that the unfortunate lady had been killed on Sunday. "Where does Mr. Ainsleigh take his brother?"

"Usually to London, miss. Master Robert often returns not much the worse for the trip, but never seems to gain any benefit. I don't suppose," added Mrs. Bendeavour, addressing the company generally, "that Master Gilbert wilfully gives Master Robert that horrid morphia, but poor Master Robert suffers great pain from sciatica, and the drug does him good. Master Gilbert loves his brother, and rather than see him suffer he gives him the morphia. But it ain't right that he should do so," said Mrs. Bendeavour vehemently. "It's cruel kindness, as I always say. Perhaps the change of air or the excitement makes Master Robert's sciatica

worse; but he certainly comes back here looking as though he had been taking the morphia. And the whole of my life is devoted to keeping the poison away from him, poor soul!"

"Where did Mr. Ainsleigh take his brother two months ago?" asked Alix.

"That was the last time," remarked Mrs. Bendeavour musingly, and apparently not suspecting the meaning of these questions. "Well, miss, it is strange that you should ask me that, for Master Gilbert took Master Robert to Blastorne."

"Are you sure, Mrs. Bendeavour?"

"From what Master Robert has let out, I am sure, miss."

"Then Robert has never told you plainly?" asked Harold.

Mrs. Bendeavour looked troubled.

"Master Robert always wanted to go to Blastorne and see Master Gilbert's home, but Master Gilbert would never take him. Nor did I wish him to go; for I didn't want the poor lady as was killed to see that Master Robert was so weak. And, in fact, Master Gilbert held the same opinion. But a couple of months ago Master Gilbert took Master Robert to London as usual. I thought it was for one of their trips, but I think Master Robert must have bothered Master Gilbert to take him to Blastorne. He brought him back on Tuesday morning, after taking him away on Thursday."

"On Thursday?" said Youle, and recollected that it was then that Gilbert had returned to the Grange after his quarrel with his wife.

"Yes; Master Gilbert wished his brother to have a longer trip than usual. He brought him back on Tuesday much worse, and I think must have told him not to

say anything about the visit to Blastorne for fear I should be angry. Master Robert did say nothing, but I gathered from what he had let drop that he had been to some big house in the country. And then, miss"—she addressed herself to Alix—"Master Robert said that he saw you from some upper window."

"I never saw him," said Alix in a low voice; "and if he had been to Blastorne I should have met him."

"Deary me!" said Mrs. Bendeavour. "Then I must be mistaken. Master Gilbert may have taken Master Robert to some other place. Master Gilbert knows many people. But won't you have some more cake and wine, miss? I have to see after Julianna, the servant, who never will do her work. I'll be back shortly." And Mrs. Bendeavour hurried out of the room, while Alix and Harold thought over what had been told to them.

Captain Rug, who had been tilting his chair backward with great complacency, interrupted these meditations.

"You see that Robert is guilty," he remarked.

"I see that Robert was at Blastorne during the time the crime was committed," retorted Harold; "but *I* don't see that he killed poor Mrs. Ainsleigh. He had no reason."

"Huh!" snorted Rug. "Robert is that weak, that he would do whatever Gilbert told him. What with Robert's indulgence in morphia, and Gilbert's stronger nature, Robert gets a kind of hypnotised."

"But to commit the crime Robert would have had to be in the house," urged Alix, "and we should have seen him."

"Not at all, miss. Gilbert could bring Robert into the house and hide him in one of those unused rooms

in the west wing. And that's what he did do, taking him in and bringing him out by the secret passage."

"Oh," said Youle, remembering his suspicions, "then there is a passage of that sort, Rugg?"

The mariner nodded, and looked at his watch.

"I can't stop here all day," he declared rudely, "so you'd just better hear what I have to say and pass along a cheque for a thousand." He paused, and then remarked impressively, "Gilbert tried to get me mixed up in the crime."

"Why?" demanded Alix and her lover simultaneously.

Rugg scratched his head.

"It's this way," he explained. "I went on the Monday and saw Barbara. She wouldn't increase my income, so I called her names—threats she said, which was a lie—and came away. Gilbert came down here on the Thursday to fetch his brother, and saw me, saying that if I came to the Grange on Sunday night, Barbara would see me again and make arrangements to give me more money."

"But how did Gilbert know about you?"

"Barbara told him. He was always anxious to know who I was, as he once found a picture of me. Barbara would never tell him; but when I called he insisted on knowing, so Barbara told him the truth."

"I remember there was trouble," said Harold.

"You bet there was, sir. Gilbert didn't see why I should be paid any money at all."

"Yet he agreed that you should come on Sunday night to see Mrs. Ainsleigh and get your pension increased."

"That was his little plot," said Rugg hurriedly "I never thought but what he was acting the square man.

I went down on Sunday, and stopped with Barnacles—Peddie, as his name is, an old shipmate of mine."

"But how is it you were not seen in the neighbourhood?"

"Why? Because I didn't want to be seen. I came to a station—not Helstone—ten miles away, on the other side of Gravesend. Barnacles met me in his cart with the hood, and smuggled me to his house."

"I don't see why you declined to be seen in the neighbourhood," said Alix. "You came openly before."

Captain Rug looked uneasy.

"I can explain that later, miss. There's a reason for sure, but I haven't time to give it just now. Let it pass that I didn't want to be seen. I came to Barnacles' house, and lay low. I was to wait till Gilbert came along and told me when to see Barbara. He sent a message by the boy Tuckle saying I was to be at the postern gate shortly after nine. I was there till after eleven waiting, and never saw no one."

"About the time the crime was committed," mused Youle. "Were you on the outside, or——"

"The outside, sir," said Rug shortly. "But no one came till between eleven and twelve. Gilbert opened the gate then and brought out his brother. Without a word he hurried me and his brother to Barnacles' house, and said that I'd better clear out and take his brother with me back to London, as Barbara was dead."

"Did he say that Robert had killed her?"

"No. I insisted that Robert did, but Gilbert denied it. And Robert was quite stupid with morphia. Gilbert said that someone had killed Barbara, and that I would likely be accused, as I had threatened her."

"But the letter was not found by that time?"

"Barbara told Gilbert that I threatened her. So

you see," went on Rug, wiping his face, "that I was in a tight hole. I had said more to Barbara than I meant, and it might be that, as I was near the house and could not prove that I was outside the gate, I might be collared. So I said nothing, but cut away with Robert in Barnacles' cart."

"Humph!" murmured Harold. "I always said that Barnacles knew something."

"He's a good sort, is Barnacles," shouted Rug, rising, with a red face. "He drove us all the way to Gravesend, and from there we went on to London."

"Why did you not come on here?" asked Alix.

"Because Gilbert wanted to bring back Robert himself. And he did, miss, on Tuesday. I went back home, and when I saw that the police had got hold of Barbara's unfinished letter, I was glad I was lying low. But I'm ready to tell all now, as I am innocent, and I want to get the reward, miss."

"By hanging Robert, who may be innocent," said Alix with disgust.

"He's guilty!" cried the Captain emphatically. "You ask Gilbert to tell the truth, and you'll find that I'm right, miss."

Harold rose and walked up and down the room. It certainly seemed as though Robert might have killed Mrs. Ainsleigh, coerced by Gilbert, for the Captain's story was sufficiently plain. But he did not wish to act rashly, in case Robert should be innocent. After some reflection he stopped before the mariner.

"You had better hold your tongue just now," he said. "Gilbert Ainsleigh isn't an easy man to tackle. What you say may or may not be true. Allow me to take steps to prove its truth. Meanwhile, say nothing and do nothing."

"But my thousand pounds," growled Rug threateningly. "If I told the police——"

"You would probably be arrested. I don't wonder you ran away, Captain, for you were, and are still, in a tight hole. How do I know that you did not kill Mrs. Ainsleigh, after all?"

Rug grew purple.

"I swear——"

"You needn't. Better hold your tongue. Alix, we will return to London, as we have heard all we wish to hear."

"But what about me?" asked Rug savagely.

"I'll see you later, when I have seen Gilbert. In this matter we must tread on eggshells, as the saying is. Robert might have killed the poor woman, or you might have done so. But, in any event, Gilbert knows the truth. So to Gilbert I shall go."

Rug would have spoken further, but Harold, now master of the situation, silenced him with a peremptory gesture, and left the house with Alix. Mrs. Bendeavour arrived just as they were stepping out of the porch.

"I do hope, miss, you will come down and see Master Robert again," she said, quite ignorant of the jeopardy in which she had placed her nursling. "When he wakes up he's sure to ask for you."

"I'll come again if I can," replied Miss Parsons evasively, and with this promise Mrs. Bendeavour was forced to be content.

Harold did not return again to Myrtle Villa. He gave Rug instructions that he was to tell Tony to come to the station, and meanwhile to hold his tongue as to what had transpired at Smallgains. Rug, who from being something of a bully was now quite mild and decidedly uneasy, agreed to do what he was told, and

the lovers went away, leaving the Captain looking after them with no very pleasant expression of countenance.

"What will you do now?" asked Alix, as they waited for the train.

"I intend to see your father."

"But you don't think he is guilty?" asked Alix in alarm.

"No. All the same, he may know something of Gilbert's plotting. If I could only—but that is neither here nor there, my dear. Don't ask me any questions. I'll explain myself when I see your father. Here is the train. Get in, dear."

"But Mr. Brady?"

"I can't wait for him. I expect he's lingering to say good-bye to Mary Jane. Well"—his eyes rested on Alix—"I can excuse him."

So the train started, and as it passed out of the station Harold laughed as he beheld Tony, with Mary Jane on his arm, rush on to the platform. He was glad the boy had missed the train, as he wished to discourse on love to Alix. She tried to interest him again in the case, but he refused to talk any more about it, being somewhat weary of detective business. Love came as a pleasant relief.

Later he sent Alix home from Victoria Station, and returned to his room in Half Moon Street. Waiting for him was a letter from Mrs. Brady—a short letter, in which she stated that she had seen Gilbert, and, after his explanation, she was quite willing that he should marry Alix Parsons. Harold was amazed.

"What lies has Ainsleigh been telling to bring this about?" he asked himself, and, as usual, could find no answer.

CHAPTER XX.

DR. PARSONS' ACCUSATION.

WHAT was the meaning of Mrs. Brady's sudden change of front? She had given Harold to understand that she loved Gilbert, unworthy though he was, and would never give him up to another woman. Yet, after an interview, she unexpectedly surrendered the strong position she held, and was not only willing that Gilbert should spoil her own life by passing out of it, but should spoil Harold's by marrying Alix Parsons. What masterword had Gilbert Ainsleigh used, to compel her to act in this way?

To find an answer to this question, Youle drove at once to Campden Hill, only to find that Mrs. Brady had left town. She had gone, said the servant, to Sir George Tyke's country house, near Gravesend. Youle remembered that this was the place where she had been staying when she paid that secret visit to Blastorne. And secret it was, seeing that she had given no name to Mrs. Push when at the "Blastorne Arms," and had worn a thick veil to hide a face well known to the public from frequently figuring in newspapers and society magazines. He wondered if Mrs. Brady's surrender was only apparent, and if she had gone to Tyke's house so as to plan some scheme whereby Gilbert might be again brought into subjection. From Gravesend she

could easily slip across to Blastorne, and, moreover, was within easy distance of Pitsea, where lived Captain Rug and Robert Ainsleigh, both seriously implicated in the murder. At first Harold had a mind to follow Mrs. Brady to the country house and demand an explanation; but after some reflection he decided to stick to his original programme and first see Dr. Parsons. The doctor, having been on the spot, was the more likely to know the truth, and might be intimidated into confessing what he knew. Incidentally, also, Youle wished to interview old Barnacles, so that he might substantiate the truth of his commander's story.

With this scheme in his head, he went down to Helstone, and drove across to the Grange at Blastorne. Alighting at the "Blastorne Arms," he stepped inside to see Mrs. Push, as it occurred to him that he should warn her that Mrs. Brady might call again. If so, Harold wished to be told of her presence, so that he might meet her on the very spot, and perhaps force out of her what share she had taken in all this underhand dealing. In the passage of the inn he came face to face with the cheery landlady. Almost without giving him time to open his mouth she began to talk, and scarcely replied to his greeting.

"If you've come to stop, Master Harold," she said volubly, "I'm sorry, as Mr. Ainsleigh has your room—your favourite room."

"What?" Harold started. "Is Mr. Ainsleigh here?"

"Yes; he came yesterday. To-day he has gone over to Gravesend, but will be back in the evening."

Youle was quite certain that Gilbert had gone to see Mrs. Brady at Sir George Tyke's, and guessed that the pair were concocting some plan. What it might be he

could not determine, but took his own precautions, and instructed the landlady artfully.

"Mr. Ainsleigh and myself are not very good friends," he said bluntly, "so I won't stop here while he remains. I'll go to the Grange."

"I am sure Miss Parsons will be glad to see you, Master Harold," said Mrs. Push archly.

"I am sure she will," replied Youle, also smiling, "and you needn't tell Mr. Ainsleigh that I am in the neighbourhood."

Mrs. Push looked grave.

"I will be plain with you, Master Harold," she said hurriedly, "as I am an old friend. You should let Mr. Ainsleigh know that you are here, else there may be trouble over Miss Parsons. He is very attentive to her, Master Harold, and if he knows you are here, he may not go near her. I know your hot temper of old, Master Harold, so——"

"Don't trouble about that, Mrs. Push," interrupted Youle sharply. "Only do what I say. Miss Parsons is engaged to me, and twenty Ainsleighs shall not come between us."

"He's a bad man, I know," pursued Mrs. Push anxiously, "seeing he neglected old Madam, and also made love to that strange lady."

"Oh, by the way, that lady may come again," said Harold quickly. "If she should, send round to the Grange and tell me."

Mrs. Push, although she was apparently bewildered by Youle's orders, promised to execute them, and saw him leaving the inn rather anxiously.

"I know his hot temper," she murmured, "and I do hope as he won't meet Mr. Ainsleigh and quarrel over Miss Parsons. To be sure, she's going to marry him;

but Mr. Ainsleigh is clever and handsome, and girls are flighty. Oh, dear me, I hope no harm will come of the matter."

Harold thought of the position of affairs, all the way to Old Barnacles' cottage, but dismissed various theories of Ainsleigh's visit to Mrs. Brady when he saw the old man in his garden. It was necessary to make his mind a blank, so as to receive fresh impressions, and he guessed that Old Barnacles would not be an easy man to tackle in the way of getting information. The ancient did not come forward as usual to greet Youle cheerfully. A memory of their last interview evidently rankled in his mind, so he merely nodded and waited for Harold to pass on. But the young man took the bull by the horns, and, as things were too dangerous to stand on ceremony, he opened the wicket gate and walked in, to be received sullenly. The sailor did not even rise from the flower over which he was stooping, but preserved an ominous silence. But Youle knew how to make him speak.

"Well, Peddie," he said cheerfully, and the mention of the name drew the old man up smartly.

"Ain't bin called that for years," said he suspiciously.

"Oh, come now; Captain Orlando Rug never called you Barnacles."

"I dunno no Captain Rug." And Barnacles stooped again.

"Strange! He knows you."

"Who said so?" demanded Barnacles, erect once more, gruff and defiant.

"He did."

Old Barnacles stared, but, fearful of committing himself, said nothing, so Youle continued easily—

"Yes, Peddie, your former captain was very con-

fidential with me, and explained how kind you had been driving him and Mr. Robert Ainsleigh to Gravesend. A long journey for that ancient pony of yours, Mr. Peddie."

"I dunno what you talk about, Muster Youle."

"Here," said Harold sharply, "it is about time to drop this pretence that you know nothing. You wrote a letter to Captain Rug warning him of what was going on here. That letter you refused to show me. However, I saw a photograph of you amongst the ship's crew, together with Captain Rug, and, in a way which does not concern you, I learned his address at Pitsea. I have been to Myrtle Villa, and I have seen both Captain Rug and Robert Ainsleigh. I know all."

"Then you knows as the Captain is innercent?" stuttered Old Barnacles, giving in before this array of facts.

"Ah, I am not so sure of that. He was in your cottage on the night Mrs. Ainsleigh was murdered."

"Yuss, he were," retorted Peddie defiantly, "and not in the big 'ouse."

"How can you prove that, seeing Captain Rug was at the postern gate yonder from nine till after eleven? He might have entered, and the crime, if you will remember, Mr. Peddie, was committed at nine-thirty."

"Not by him," muttered Old Barnacles stubbornly. "Do you think I'd ha' helped him, old shipmate though he was, if I thought as he'd killed the kindest lady as ever lived, Muster Youle?"

"No, I don't. You think he is innocent, and so helped him to escape from the neighbourhood without being seen. But he might be guilty for all that."

"No," persisted the ancient, leaning on his spade; "if he killed old Madam, Muster Youle, how comes it as

the monk as did the killing was walking about the park arter the Captain left the neighbourhood?"

"Humph!" Harold recalled the description of the monk given by Mrs. Allison, the lodge-keeper, but pretended ignorance, so as to make the old man speak out. "Did the monk—the so-called ghost—walk?"

"Yuss, it did, Muster Youle, and it weren't no more a ghost than I am, sir. Ghosts don't wear clothes as you can handle."

"Can you prove that this particular ghost did not?"

"Why," declared Old Barnacles, opening his eye very wide, "I tore the hood of his dress off myself."

"You—tore—the—hood?" echoed Youle slowly, and fixing the man with a piercing glance. "Then, Mr. Peddie, it was you who threw that parcel containing the hood over the park gates, so that it might come into my possession?"

"It were." Old Barnacles flung out his hand with a gesture of despair. "You knows so much, so you may as well know all, Muster Youle. I've tried to keep the Captain dark, but it ain't no good. All I do know is that he nivir laid hands on old Madam."

"We'll give him the benefit of the doubt," said Harold, after a pause. "And now perhaps you will tell me how the hood came into your possession, and why you placed it in my hands in that secret way."

Old Barnacles ticked off the questions on his horny fingers.

"The fust thing you arsk, sir, is answered this way. Knowing as Muster Ainsleigh said as my captain might be thought a murderer, I got him away, and then looked round to see who might have made free, to strangle old Madam, as was so good to me. I watched in the park, for I didn't believe in no ghost nohow, and knew it was

some lubber dressed up to get through the business. I watched and watched and watched, and then I see the ghost coming down the avenue in the twilight, being hidden in the hedge opposite the lodge. I see Mrs. Allison come out an' hear her squeal, and see her run into the 'ouse, shutting the door with a bang, being a female and nervous."

"Weren't you nervous yourself, Peddie?"

"No, Muster Youle, not being a thinker as ghosts is ghosts, for flesh an' blood they are, I sprang out on to the ghost as he come along, very tall, and made a grab at him."

"Come now, Peddie, a man of your age can't leap."

"But I did—to ketch his head and jam him down."

"Was the ghost so tall?" asked Harold, remembering the report of Mrs. Allison, which at the time he had thought exaggerated.

"Tall! he was over six feet considerable," said the ancient, "and maybe seven, as I'm a Christian man. I grabbed the head of he, and jumped painful, owing to rheumatics. The ghost, he guv a screech and run away fearful like, but I pulled off his hood, and saw——"

"What did you see?"

"A pole, like as 'twas the mainmast of a ship."

Harold stared.

"What on earth do you mean?" he asked.

Old Barnacles turned a quid in his mouth and spat.

"What did *it* mean, you'd be saying, Muster Youle, and that question did I arsk myself. It bolted in the dark, and where it went with the pole I dunno, being took back with the diskivery, and staring at the hood which I held in my hand. What I *do* think, arter turning the matter over in the mind o' me, Muster Youle, is

that the ghost was a short pusson and carried a pole to make hisself look taller, and maybe to prevent the frock of that there monk trailin' on the ground."

"Perhaps." Harold reflected, but could come to no conclusion. "Why did you not tell the police?"

"I niver ha' naught to do wi' police," said Old Barnacles in a tone of contempt. "Poor things them, sir. An' 'sides, I thought as they'd arsk questions, and that, me, being old like, might let out about the skipper. No, Muster Youle, I goes home with the hood, and thinks. Then I ses to myself, I ses, if I talks, I'll maybe let slip summat as I shouldn't. Muster Youle, ses I, is lookin' arter the murder, so, I ses, I'll give the hood to him, and maybe, I ses to myself, I ses, if he finds the assassin, Captain Rug 'll be more happy like."

Youle nodded.

"I see your reason," he said; "but it would have been better had you given the hood to me directly instead of throwing it over the gate."

"No," said Old Barnacles obstinately. "When you talked to me that day I see as you suspected the skipper, so said naught. An' when you come back fro' the village, I was watching near them gates with the hood in a parcel in my hand, and, when you enters, I throws it over and gets away wonderful quick for a man of my years and rheumatics."

"You managed very cleverly, Peddie, and certainly puzzled me."

"Well, sir," said Barnacles, with a chuckle, and pleased at his having outwitted Youle, "having, as you might say, seen the ghost, as was no ghost, but the lubber as murdered the good lady, I knowed for certain, whatever I might ha' thought, that the skipper was as an innercent babe; he not being in the place, you see,

Muster Youle, and having no call to go about as that there ghost."

"I see, Peddie. Did you recognise the so-called ghost?"

"Why, there, sir, didn't I tell you as I saw only a bare pole?"

"Then you think that some person was carrying a pole, with the hood and the dress perched on top?"

"Yuss, Muster Youle, though I didn't see no legs; but perhaps in the dark my eyes didn't see as they might, me not being a cat. But a bare pole I certinly did see. What do you think, sir?"

"I don't know what to think," said Harold, with a shrug, "save that this riddle becomes more difficult to answer every day. Still, I'll tell you one thing, Peddie —I believe that Captain Rug is innocent."

Old Barnacles slapped his aged knee with a hoarse laugh.

"It do my heart good to hear you say so, Muster Youle, that it do."

Harold nodded in a perfunctory manner.

"Have you any idea of the murderer's name, Peddie?"

"No, sir. If I did know, I'd thrash him for killing a good, kind lady like old Madam. And you, sir?"

"I know nothing. I am looking for the assassin, but hitherto have had no luck. Now I am going to the Grange, Peddie. You hold your tongue until I give you leave to speak."

Old Barnacles nodded.

"No one won't git nothing fro' me nohow," he said, and fell to work again, singing a sea-song in a cracked voice, apparently pleased that he had saved his late skipper's character.

Youle walked across the stretch of green and opened the postern gate in the red brick wall surrounding the park. Formerly, during the lifetime of Mrs. Ainsleigh, this had been kept locked, but since Alix had taken to visit Old Barnacles she had left it open. Youle followed the path on the other side of the gate, which led through a shrubbery to the west wing of the house. If the secret passage was in this wing, and if Gilbert had secreted his brother there, it would be quite easy for him to have rid himself of the poor fellow. While the house in the front was being searched for a stranger, Gilbert, under pretence of retiring to bed (as he had done on the night), could easily have smuggled Robert out of the west wing, by the secret passage, along the winding path of the shrubbery, through the postern gate, and into the cottage of Old Barnacles, there to be taken by the man, in his covered cart, to Gravesend. Youle saw plainly how it was that neither Robert Ainsleigh nor Captain Rug had been seen in the neighbourhood on or about the time of the murder. But further reflections on this point were put a stop to by the sight of Dr. Parsons.

The fat doctor, with his coat off and his shirt-sleeves rolled up, was practising gymnastics on a smooth stretch of sward immediately under the terrace and round the corner of the west wing. Puffing and panting, he was rising and sinking on his dumpy legs, and did not even stop when he beheld the astonished face of Youle.

"Trying to make myself light and supple," he puffed, rising and falling like a pump-handle. "One, two, and three—there." With a final gasp he rose and, walking to a garden seat, sat down exhausted. "Only when the physical body is supple can the spirit control

it," he said, breathing more easily. "How are you, Youle?"

"Quite well. I have come to ask you to put me up for the night."

"You must ask my daughter," said the doctor bitterly, and struggling into his coat. "I am nothing and nobody here."

"In my eyes you are somebody," said Youle drily "I am very much interested in you, Dr. Parsons."

The little man went white.

"What do you know?"

"A great deal, but you know more. For instance,' Harold touched his victim's chest lightly, "you know who killed Mrs. Ainsleigh."

"I do not," said Parsons faintly; then began to bluster. "See here, I don't call it fair of you to come and——"

Harold silenced him.

"We have done with all this bluff," he said in a sharp tone. "I must have the truth."

"I don't know it."

"Yes, you do. And if you don't tell me the truth, I'll have you arrested, Dr. Parsons—do you hear?—arrested."

The doctor gave a squeal like that of a trapped rabbit.

"Arrest me?"

"Yes." Youle's tone was severe and his look stern. "For the murder of Mrs. Ainsleigh."

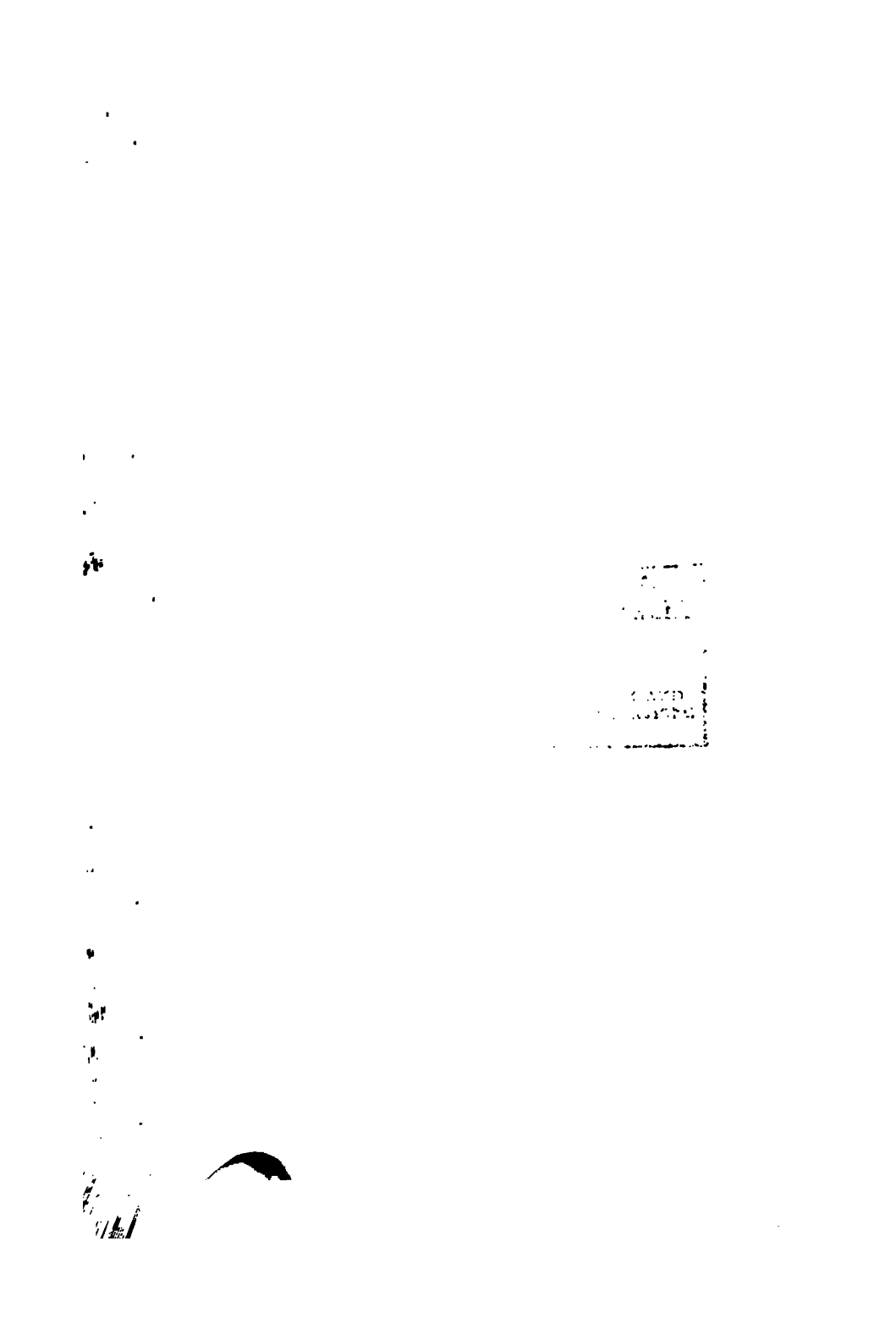
"I never did! I never—never—how dare—how dare——"

"Then, if you are innocent, who is guilty?"

"Ask—ask Gilbert Ainsleigh."

"Have you asked him?" demanded Youle quickly.

"'OUT WITH IT. HE TOLD YOU WHO STRANGLED MRS. AINSLEIGH'" (p. 215).



"Yes; and he told me—told me——"

"Out with it. He told you who strangled Mrs. Ainsleigh?"

"Yes. He—he—oh," the doctor rose, "I have had enough of being accused. I'll tell all that he told me. Mrs. Ainsleigh was strangled—that is, she was killed——"

"Well, well——"

"By a woman called Brady."

CHAPTER XXI.

A DARK DEED.

"A WOMAN called Brady!" Harold echoed the words in amazed tones. "Are you talking of the celebrated actress?"

"Yes," said Parsons sullenly. "Ainsleigh says that she killed his wife—out of jealousy, I believe."

Youle remembered how Mrs. Brady had been at the "Blastorne Arms" on the evening of the murder, and that, according to her son, she had not returned to Sir George Tyke's house until midnight. Also he knew that she loved Gilbert, by her own confession, and would do much to retain him. Still, he did not think she would go so far as to murder an unoffending old lady. And, moreover, she had agreed that Gilbert should marry Alix.

"I don't think you know what you are saying," he said to the doctor, as soon as he recovered his breath.

"I am only repeating what Ainsleigh said," retorted the other, who was sitting, hunched up, looking a picture of misery and nervous fear.

"When did Ainsleigh tell you this?"

"Yesterday. I saw him when he came here to make love to Alix, and——"

"What?" demanded Youle fiercely. "What the devil do you mean by allowing him to make love to Alix?"

"You said that your engagement with my daughter was at an end," murmured Parsons in a cowed manner.

"I did. Now our engagement is renewed."

"I never knew that, Youle."

"You knew perfectly well that Alix became engaged to that scamp of an Ainsleigh only to save you."

"I never——"

"Don't deny it, Parsons. Remember our meeting when I told you that Alix and I had parted. You then murmured something about the price to be paid. Even then I guessed what you meant, although you would not explain. Now I am certain of it."

"How can you be certain?"

"Alix told me so herself. I met her at Pitsea. She went there to see Captain Rug."

"I know nothing about him," said Parsons doggedly; but his face was white, and great drops of perspiration beaded his bald forehead.

"I don't know how much you know, or of how much you are ignorant," retorted Youle, disgusted with the shuffling of the man; "but this I do know, that you shall make a clean breast of this matter to me, or stand in the dock."

"Youle," whimpered the little man, thoroughly frightened, "you surely would not ruin the father of the girl you love?"

"I don't think you have been much of a father to Alix," replied Youle angrily. "You have made her a slave all her life. Only when she got Mrs. Ainsleigh's money did she throw off your chains. I really think you would be better out of her life than in it."

"Alix would not think so. I am her father, when all is said and done."

"Unfortunately," said Youle in scathing tones, "we

cannot alter that relationship. But Alix has little love for you, and absolutely no respect. It takes more than the mere name of father to make her an obedient daughter. You have done nothing to secure her love, or her respect either."

"I am her father," repeated the doctor obstinately.

"And you apparently think that answers all. But in this instance it does not, Dr. Parsons. I love Alix, and would willingly save her pain. But she owes it to the memory of the poor woman who left her a fortune, to avenge that woman's death. You know the truth, and you must tell it to me or take the consequences."

"I have told the truth," protested Parsons like a whipped child, "and I wish you would not upset my nerves in this way."

"I'll upset them a deal more before I finish with you," replied Harold grimly. "Now then, Doctor, tell your story."

"I have nothing to tell," said Parsons peevishly. "If I were guilty, would I be sitting here? You know I would not. I would have escaped from England at the first opportunity. Indeed, the loss of Mrs. Ainsleigh was a serious one to me, seeing it deprived me of an income."

"Ah, but you might have known that she intended to leave the money to Alix, and, thinking you would handle it, might have——"

"I didn't, and I never knew that she had altered her will. I told you before, and I tell you again, that I was extremely astonished when I heard Quail read that will. Besides, Alix has not treated me well, and I lose rather than gain by the death of my dear friend and patroness."

"Don't talk like that. It doesn't go down with me. We will presume that you are innocent, and, to speak

plainly, I think you are too much of a coward to kill anyone, even a woman."

"Look at home for your own faults," said Parsons tartly. "I am innocent, and that's all about it. I admit that Alix did get engaged to Gilbert Ainsleigh because he accused me. But he had no proof."

"What about that golden cross?" And Youle glanced downward at the watch-chain on which Parsons used to wear the ornament.

"Ainsleigh told me about that, and said that I had lost it in the struggle with his wife. Also that the boy had picked it up in the room. What could I do against that evidence—or, rather, what could Alix? To save me she——"

"Yes, yes, I know all about that," interrupted Harold testily. "But did you lose the cross in that parlour?"

"No; I swear I did not. I really lost it in my bedroom."

"Can you be sure of that?"

"Certain," said Parsons emphatically. "I remembered that at my breakfast on Sunday I missed it. After breakfast I went back to my room, but could not find it. I expect it slipped under the bed or under the chest of drawers. I thought no more about it until after the murder, and then I asked for it."

"Why did you, at that moment?"

Parsons shuffled.

"I thought it might get me into trouble," he said uneasily; "and you see that it has. I believe——" He stopped.

"Well, and what do you believe?"

"I think Tuckle found it when he went to look for my cigar-holder."

"Did you ask Tuckle?"

"No. I would have done so, only he has gone away."

"Gone away?" Harold could not suppress his surprise.

"Yes. A couple of days ago Alix found that he had been doing something wrong, so she dismissed him. I understand that he has left the neighbourhood."

"Queer," mused Harold. "I must question Alix. She said nothing to me about it when we were at Pitsea. But as Tuckle only left the Grange two days ago, you had ample time to question him."

"Well, I did ask him once or twice," prevaricated the doctor; "but he denied everything."

Youle was disgusted. Parsons was so slippery a man that he could not be sure that he was speaking the truth. First he said one thing and then another, flatly contradicting himself. However, it was useless to point out these errors, as the man would only tell another lie to back up his former one.

"And you saw Ainsleigh yesterday?"

"Yes. He came here, to find that Alix was at Pitsea."

"Did you tell him that?"

"I did, and he seemed annoyed."

"Did he explain the reason for his annoyance?"

"No; I never asked him. But he told me that Mrs. Brady had killed Mrs. Ainsleigh."

"Voluntarily?"

Parsons nodded.

"I never asked him, because I am sick and tired of this murder. But he said that Mrs. Brady had come to the 'Blastorne Arms' on the evening of the crime—Sunday it was—and had waited about, until she killed Mrs. Ainsleigh out of jealousy."

"How did she enter the house?"

"I never asked. I am sick of the whole business."

"Did you ask how Ainsleigh reconciled his accusation of you with his accusation of Mrs. Brady?"

"Yes, I did," said the doctor in an injured tone, "and he said that he accused me only to force Alix to marry him." Parsons rose and tried to assume a dignified demeanour. "I decline to answer any more questions."

Youle shrugged his shoulders.

"As you please. When you do answer, you do nothing but tell lies."

"How dare you! I have told the truth."

"For the first time in your life, then," retorted Harold. He disliked the doctor so much that he had a violent desire to take him up and pitch him over the near hedge, behind which was a tempting bed of nettles. "I don't know how Alix ever came to have such a father. However, talking to you is wearisome. I'll see Ainsleigh and make him prove his accusation of Mrs. Brady, which I don't believe. Good day."

But the doctor would not let him go so easily.

"I'd like to kill you!" he spluttered furiously. "You have insulted me—me, a man of unstained honour! You are a bully and a coward, and think you can insult an English gentleman with impunity. You shall never marry my daughter—never—never—never! I'll kill you —I'll shoot you in the dark—I'll——"

What else the furious little man intended to do Youle never heard. He simply shrugged his shoulders at this ebullition of temper, and strolled away. Dr. Parsons was too poor a creature for a man to become angry with. Besides, after the disagreeable half-hour with the father, Youle wished to seek the more pleasant society of the daughter, and accordingly presented him-

self at the front door. Thomson opened the door, and expressed himself delighted to see Mr. Youle by permitting a smile to overspread his countenance. Youle never spoke to servants save in the way of business; but as he handed over his hat and stick he allowed himself to ask a question.

"You have got rid of Tuckle, I hear, Thomson?"

"Yes, sir; and very glad we all are to see the last of that young rip, if you will pardon me, sir, for being so bold. I hear that he is at the 'Blastorne Arms.'"

Harold, who was turning away, wheeled suddenly.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, sir. We all thought that he had left the neighbourhood he had disgraced so long, sir. And I dessay, sir, as he had, and went up to London to see Mr. Ainsleigh. Now he's come back with him, to insult us all with his presence."

Youle laughed, but did not ask any further questions, having heard all he wished to know and something more. From the fact that Tuckle had returned to Ainsleigh, he saw well that the quarrel at the time Gilbert had left the Grange after the funeral was a put-up job, as he had long suspected. Tuckle had been left behind as Ainsleigh's spy, and, without doubt, had been caught practising his vocation. Notwithstanding the boy's tender years, he was a young rip, as the stately Thomson very truly observed. As in the case of Bailey Junior, in Dickens' novel, "all the wickedness of the world was print" to Tuckle.

Alix was in the drawing-room, looking rather disturbed. When Harold entered, unannounced, she started up with an angry flush. When she saw who her visitor was, she ran towards him with outstretched arms and threw herself on his breast.

"I thought it was Mr. Ainsleigh," she said, recovering herself. "I heard that he was at the 'Blastorne Arms,' and knew that he would come here to bother me."

"He won't, so long as I am here," said Youle grimly. "You are entirely mine own, dearest, and Ainsleigh had better keep his hands off. But you need have no fear. Ainsleigh is at the inn, but to-day has gone to see Mrs. Brady, who is at Sir George Tyke's house on the hither side of Gravesend."

"Why has she gone there?"

"I can't say. Furthermore, she has withdrawn her opposition to your marrying Ainsleigh."

Alix coloured with vexation.

"That is very good of her, but I don't intend to marry Mr. Ainsleigh. I thought that was settled."

"Quite so; but Mrs. Brady doesn't know what we know. I expect that Ainsleigh forced her to consent to leave him alone by threatening to accuse her of the crime, as he has done to your father."

"What?" Alix caught her lover's arm. "Do you mean to say——"

"Of course, I mean what I do say. Ainsleigh accused your father to secure you, and now accuses Mrs. Brady to get rid of her."

"Do you believe that she is guilty, Harold?"

"No, I do not. And, for the life of me, I can't think who is the criminal. But I'm going to see Mrs. Brady and interview Ainsleigh and make a general inquiry all round. Perhaps I may call in the police."

"Oh, Harold!" Alix gave a startled cry. "My father!"

"He is all right. Mrs. Brady may be guilty, or Robert Ainsleigh, or Rug, or anyone else—even Old Barnacles. But your father is innocent, my dear. I am

sure of that. By the way, will you ask me to stop here for a few days? Your father is in the house, so I presume you can have male guests if you like."

"Certainly, dear. I am delighted. Your luggage——"

"Only a handbag, which I left at the 'Blastorne Arms.' I had intended stopping there, but think it best not to, as I wish to avoid meeting Ainsleigh until I am ready for him. I'll walk back to the inn later and return in time for dinner. Meanwhile, tell me why you dismissed that brat Tuckle."

"Oh, Harold, who told you that I had?"

"Your father. Why did you not inform me yesterday?"

Alix put her hand to her head in a confused way.

"Really, dear, I can't say. I feel quite dizzy with all these troubles."

"And so do I. I'll be glad when we learn who killed Mrs. Ainsleigh and can have a rest. Detective business is all very well in stories, but in real life it is apt to become monotonous. Well, dear, about Tuckle?"

"I had to dismiss him, Harold, because I found him at my desk in the parlour reading your letters. I left some on the table, and he had the impertinence to read them."

"By order of Ainsleigh, I expect. So you turned him out."

"Yes," said Alix with spirit; "but I didn't box his ears, as I should have done. He's a wicked little boy."

"He's a criminal of the worst," said Youle grimly. "I have my suspicions of Master Tuckle. I shouldn't wonder—but that can come later, dearest. Let us banish this detective business and talk about our own affairs until I go back to the 'Blastorne Arms.'"

"Won't you let me send a groom?"

"No; I want to see if Ainsleigh has come back. Also I might take a look at Tuckle, and find what he is doing there. He's up to no good, I'm very sure. I'll be back to dinner about eight, if that is not too late."

"Father likes to dine at seven, but we will make it eight to-night."

"No; I'll be back, if I can, at seven."

"We'll have the dinner at eight," insisted Alix, only too pleased to confer a favour on her lover. "And now let us have a talk."

And talk they did. After dry facts it was a pleasure to return to the imaginations of love. They planned their future and recalled pleasant memories, and altogether had a very delightful golden time. Only when the twilight came on, and the nightingales began to sing in the dusky garden, did Harold tear himself away. He went off in the best of spirits, promising to fly back on the wings of love.

He soon reached the inn, and found that Ainsleigh had returned, but had gone out again. Rather pleased that he had not stumbled against him at a moment when he was unprepared, Harold took his bag and walked back to the Grange. Turning off the high road, he strolled through a meadow along the footpath, enjoying the delicious twilight. It was quite dusk, and very peaceful, with shadows everywhere, and joy in the heart of the lover, who strolled along thinking of the face he adored. Suddenly a spurt of flame shot from a near hedge, and Youle felt a sharp pain in his leg. He fell prone to the ground; tried to rise, and could not. The treacherous shot had broken his ankle.

CHAPTER XXII.

ALIX AND MRS. BRADY.

NO second shot was fired. Perhaps the assailant, seeing Youle drop, thought that he was killed. Harold guessed that this thought would occur to the person in ambush; therefore, when he fell, he lay quite still and played 'possum. He fancied that the intended assassin might come forward to see if the deed was well done, and then intended—since he could not run—to grasp him by the leg. And at the worst he might recognise him. Youle thought it would be a man, as he never for one moment dreamed that a woman would fire on him.

But the assassin never appeared. After the one shot all was still, and shortly the affrighted nightingales began again to sing. The pain of the shot, which had broken the ankle bone, was great, and Youle had much to do to keep himself from fainting outright. However, by a powerful effort of will, he was able to preserve his senses, and, in spite of the agony, managed to crawl back the way he came as far as the stile. Here Nature would have her way, and, notwithstanding his fortitude, he fainted. But, before his senses left him, he heard a ploughboy coming along the road whistling, and managed to give one shout, which, although faint, was pretty certain to be heard.

When he came to his senses, he was lying on a bed, and Alix was bending over him, much alarmed. When he opened his eyes and called her feebly by name, she

bent down and kissed him with tears in her eyes, and a heartfelt prayer of thanks.

"Dearest, I thought you were dead."

"How did you bring me here?" he asked faintly.

"One of the labourers was coming along the road and heard you cry out. He found you by the stile, and at first thought you were dead. At once he hurried back to the village for help, and, when it was seen that it was you, they brought you here. Oh, Harold," she wreathed her arms round him, "I thought I had lost you for ever."

"And you will lose him, Alix, unless you stop talking," said the testy voice of Dr. Parsons. "He'll be in a high fever soon. Let him be, and go downstairs."

"No; I wish to nurse him. Tell me what to do, father."

"You had better go downstairs, my dear."

"I won't," cried Alix obstinately. "No one touches Harold but me. He may die."

The sick man, although half insensible again, gathered the sense of the words and laughed.

"I'm all right," he murmured. "I've had much worse wounds in Africa. Don't worry, Alix, and—and——" His voice trailed off, and he fainted again.

"There," said Parsons sharply, "see what you have done."

"Let me nurse him, father."

The doctor grumbled as he stooped over the wounded man.

"I suppose someone must nurse him, so why not you? Here, go to my room and get some lint. I must examine the leg."

Alix went away obediently enough, and Parsons, forgetting his petty jealousies, became professional

He did not wish Harold to die, for he shrewdly suspected that Youle was the sole man who could save him from the malice of Ainsleigh. If that gentleman did not get his own way with Alix, he was quite ready to turn round and accuse the doctor again; and Parsons knew what a strong case could be made out against him. Therefore he did his best with the patient, and, being really a good surgeon, extracted the bullet very cleverly.

Of course, Youle knew nothing of this, as he became delirious. All night Alix watched by his side, and in the morning, when he fell into a refreshing slumber, her cheeks were pale and wan. But in spite of what her father advised—he did no more than advise, as he knew how determined Alix was—she would not retire to bed, but sat beside Harold, holding his hand, and playing the onerous part of a sick nurse to perfection.

It was the afternoon when Harold came to his senses, and Parsons allowed him to talk very little. But Harold gathered that inquiry was being made for the individual who had fired the shot, and that Inspector Unwin had been sent for.

"No, no!" he murmured to Alix as she bent over him, "don't call in the police. Let sleeping dogs lie. I'll punish him myself."

"Who?" asked Alix softly.

"Gilbert Ainsleigh. I believe he—he——"

Then he fell asleep, overcome with drowsiness, from sheer feebleness. But Alix gathered that Gilbert, according to Harold, had fired the shot. It was by no means unlikely, she thought, seeing that Harold was bent upon learning who had murdered Mrs. Ainsleigh, and the discovery might interfere with Gilbert's scheme of recovering the fortune by marrying Alix herself.

She quite recognised that it would be best not to call

in the police until Youle was sufficiently recovered to direct operations, and so sent a message to Inspector Unwin that he need not come. All the same the inspector did come, and then Alix persuaded him (although he was rather unwilling to concede so much) to wait until Harold could speak.

"Though I see plainly that we must wait," said Unwin, looking down at the white face of the sick man, "Mr. Youle must explain exactly what took place before we can move."

Alix was the only one who had heard Youle's low-toned accusation of Gilbert, and kept this information to herself. However, she sent to the inn, and found that Mr. Ainsleigh had gone to town, but had left Tuckle behind with his luggage. Mr. Ainsleigh intended to return, according to the landlady, so Alix conjectured that Gilbert was waiting to learn if Harold would live or die. If he lived, Ainsleigh would probably return to face out the matter, if accused; but if Youle died, then he would possibly leave England. And to gain information he had left Tuckle behind in his usual character of a spy. Of course, all this was mere theory; but Alix could solve the mystery of Ainsleigh's conduct in no other way.

Her mode of procedure appeared to please Harold. When he woke on the afternoon of the second day after his accident, he was quite able to see Inspector Unwin, who came over at once. Unwin questioned the young man as to who had fired the shot. Harold, as Alix guessed he would, professed ignorance. All he declared was, that he was passing through the meadow when the shot was fired, and that he saw no one. Unwin was disappointed, and went out to see what he could discover. Then it was that Alix told her lover how

Gilbert had left Blastorne for the time being. He approved of her reticence.

"I am quite sure Ainsleigh fired the shot," he said, when Alix and he were alone. "He returned to the inn, and learned from Mrs. Push that I was in the neighbourhood and would come back for my bag. He was out when I came, and probably watched me, and followed. It was easy for him, knowing the field, to conceal himself behind that hedge and fire. I dare say he thought he had killed me, but was too frightened of being caught to come out and make sure. If he had I'd have collared him by the leg. But it is just as well that things are as they are, my dear Alix."

"Why?" she asked, making his pillows more easy.

"Because he thinks I am learning too much about the case."

"Harold, surely you don't think that he killed Mrs. Ainsleigh?"

"By no means. We saw him asleep in the pagoda, if you remember, and surely we can believe the evidence of our own eyes. All the same, I believe that, not knowing his wife had altered her will, he contrived a plot to get her put out of the way."

"Are you thinking of Robert Ainsleigh?"

"Yes and no. Gilbert, to gain his ends, would not hesitate to sacrifice his own brother, horrible though it seems to us. But I don't see how he could induce even a weak-willed morphia slave like Robert to kill an unoffending old lady. There is your father, of course——"

"Harold! Harold!"

"Dear, we must look on all sides and from every point of view. Your father is weak willed, like Robert, yet more able to act, not being quite so helpless.

Gilbert has a strong will, and he might have induced your father to do the deed. Yet I can scarcely believe it."

"I certainly don't," declared Alix emphatically. "Papa is weak, but he would never behave like that. Foolish as he is, I think he would hesitate to take the life of a fellow-creature, and especially one who had been kind to him. You judge my father much too harshly."

"Perhaps I do," murmured Harold apologetically. "What about Mrs. Brady?"

"I don't think a woman would have force enough to strangle Mrs. Ainsleigh, even if she would dare to run such a risk."

"Mrs. Brady is a strong woman," said Harold thoughtfully. "Of course, in spite of Rug's denial and Barnacles' evidence, Rug may be guilty. I really can't say. This case makes my head ache."

"Then don't think any more about it for the present," said Alix coaxingly. "Go to sleep. I'll sing you something soft and soothing."

Youle pressed her hand, and intimated thus silently that he was only too pleased to be musically lulled. Alix began to sing softly, and soon had the satisfaction of seeing him sink into a refreshing slumber. For quite an hour she sat beside him holding his hand, and was only aroused from a sleep which was stealing over her by the entrance of Thomson on tiptoe. The butler advanced towards the bed in spite of the frown of his young mistress.

"A lady has called to see Mr. Youle," whispered Thomson, "and will take no denial. This is her card, miss."

Alix, still holding Harold's hand, glanced at the piece of pasteboard presented on a silver salver for her

inspection, and started when she read the name of Mrs Brady. After a glance at the sleeping man, she made up her mind how to act, and softly disengaged her hand from that of the sleeper. Then, placing her finger on her lips to enforce quietness, she moved silently to the door, followed by the butler. When without, she spoke still softly, in case Harold should waken and hear.

"Send the housekeeper to watch Mr. Youle," she directed. "I'll see this lady myself."

Thomson bowed and moved away in search of the housekeeper, while his mistress descended the stairs wondering why Mrs. Brady had come, and for what reason she desired to see Harold Youle. Certainly it was about the case and in connection with Gilbert's underhand plotting; but Alix failed to see how Youle could help the ex-actress in any way whatsoever.

Mrs. Brady, looking wonderfully handsome, in a fashionable summer dress, but with pale cheeks and glittering eyes, rose as Alix entered. Without preamble she plunged into conversation.

"You are no doubt Miss Parsons," she said. "May I see Mr. Youle?"

"I don't think so, Mrs. Brady," replied Alix quietly and taking in the details of the other's costume with a woman's swiftness. "He's been wounded, and is still very ill."

Mrs. Brady's full lips quivered.

"I heard that someone had tried to assassinate him," she said quietly enough. "The landlady at the 'Blastorne Arms' told me. I went there to see Mr Ainsleigh, but find that he has gone to London Therefore, when I heard of the accident to Mr. Youle I came here to inquire, and, if possible, to see my old friend."

The lips of Alix Parsons curled.

"You call it accident," she said in a low tone of scorn. "I call it assassination."

"So did I a few seconds ago. Don't let us quarrel, Miss Parsons. I come as your friend, and not as your enemy."

"I should think so, Mrs. Brady. There is no reason why we should be enemies."

"You forget," Mrs. Brady took a seat, and assumed a graceful pose from sheer habit of the footlights; "we both love the same man."

"Mr. Youle?"

The actress made an impatient gesture.

"Mr. Ainsleigh."

"You are wrong. I love Mr. Youle, not Mr. Ainsleigh."

"Yet you are engaged to the latter."

"Pardon me, I am engaged to Harold Youle."

"I know that you *were*," said Mrs. Brady, looking puzzled; "but Gilbert told me——"

"That I had jilted Harold for him," finished Alix quietly. "Well, I did so for a few days, but not of my own free will. Now that I have seen Harold I have changed my mind."

"You seem to be somewhat whimsical," said Mrs. Brady, tapping her foot impatiently.

"You would also have been whimsical had you been placed by Mr. Ainsleigh in the position in which he placed me." Alix looked hard at Mrs. Brady to watch the effect of her next words. "Mr. Ainsleigh accused my father of having murdered Mrs. Ainsleigh. To prevent his giving notice to the police I agreed to become engaged to him."

"Vile! vile!" murmured Mrs. Brady, her cheek

paling again. "But we know—you and I know, my dear—that Gilbert Ainsleigh is not a good man."

"Yet you love him."

"And you wish to know the reason?" questioned Mrs. Brady with scorn. "Oh, my dear, I can imagine a man asking for a reason; but you are a woman, and you know what our sex is. I love Gilbert, and whatever he might do I should still love him. But what reason, I ask in my turn, can you give for renewing your engagement with Youle?"

"I love him," said Alix. "You must know that?"

"Of course, and a very handsome couple you will make. I am very fond of Harold, whom I have known for many years. But can you afford to defy Gilbert?"

"I can and do."

"He may have your father arrested."

"He will not dare to do that."

"Don't be too sure. To gain his ends Gilbert will do much. He was quite ready to throw me over, to secure you and your fortune."

"And you allowed him to."

Mrs. Brady bowed her head.

"I had no choice in the matter," she said faintly. "Gilbert spares no one when he wishes to get his own way."

"He won't get his own way in this instance," said Alix drily. "I am quite sure that he can do me no harm."

"Your father?"

"He can't harm my father either. My father, as I know, is innocent."

"I never thought he was guilty," retorted Mrs. Brady as drily as Alix had spoken. "But Gilbert cares nothing for that. He can bring the crime home to your father."

Alix shrugged her shoulders.

"To you also, I understand," said she.

Mrs. Brady started up with an angry exclamation.

"What do you mean by that accusation, Miss Parsons?"

"What I mean is plain enough. Gilbert told my father that you——"

"It's a lie!" burst out the other woman, and clenched her hand until the glove split. "Gilbert certainly said that he would accuse me of committing the murder unless I allowed him to marry you. I was placed in such a position that I had to—had to—oh, to think that he of all men should accuse me!"

"And yet you love a man who can act so cowardly a part?"

"I don't know. He is a scoundrel and a liar and a—— Oh, my girl, my girl! Thank God that Youle is a good, honest gentleman, and not such a creature as Gilbert Ainsleigh."

"You must overcome your love, Mrs. Brady. He is quite unworthy."

"I know that—I have known it all along; and yet—we women, you know what fools we are when the heart governs the head. But I must fight against this infatuation. What you say makes the fight a trifle easier. He accuses me, the villain, yet knows that I am innocent."

Alix took Mrs. Brady's hand.

"I am quite sure that you are innocent," she assured her earnestly. "I shall always be your friend."

"Friend! friend—ah, how I need a friend! Yes, my friend, and to prove that I am honest in my friendship, I'll tell you who killed Mrs. Ainsleigh."

"Yes?" questioned Alix, her heart beating rapidly.

"Robert Ainsleigh—Gilbert's mad brother!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

A NEW CLUE.

MRS. BRADY made this announcement in her best dramatic manner, but it had less effect on Alix than she expected. "You don't seem to be very surprised," said Mrs. Brady, discomfited.

"No. I rather expected you to say what you did."

"You expected it!"—the ex-actress was genuinely surprised—"then you know Robert Ainsleigh?"

"I made his acquaintance the other day at Pitsea. Captain Rug also accuses him."

"Rug, Rug?—I know that name. Where have I heard it?"

"Your son is in love with Captain Rug's daughter, I believe."

Mrs. Brady nodded. "Yes. Mary Jane Rug—merely a boy and girl calf love, Miss Parsons. I heard something about the young woman living at Pitsea, and although I knew that Robert Ainsleigh lived there also, it never came into my mind to connect the two. Who is Captain Rug, and what does he know of the matter?"

"Has not Gilbert told you?"

"No. It did not suit him, I suppose. Gilbert never tells me anything save what is necessary to his plans. But you see that I am honest in my friendship for you, Miss Parsons. Tell me exactly how matters stand, as it may be necessary for me to defend myself against

Gilbert. He wants to get rid of me in order to marry you."

"I shall never marry him," said Alix decisively. "I was foolish even to engage myself to him; but I lost my head for the moment in thinking of my father's peril. But if I tell you what I know, will you——"

"Tell you everything?" interrupted Mrs. Brady. "Of course I will. We must stand shoulder to shoulder, unless we want Gilbert to get his own way, Miss Parsons."

"I have an idea that Mr. Ainsleigh is coming to the end of his tether, Mrs. Brady," replied Alix quickly; "he has plotted and counter-plotted for a long time, but the hour of punishment is at hand."

"Oh!" Mrs. Brady gasped. "You will not harm him!"

"No, nor will Harold. But the law may."

"The law! Surely you don't think——"

"That he killed his wife himself? No. I and Harold saw Gilbert asleep in the pagoda at the time the crime was committed. He did not kill poor Mrs. Ainsleigh himself, but I am quite sure that he forced his brother to murder her."

Mrs. Brady nodded, her face grey with horror. "I really believe he did; and yet he explains the matter differently. He declared to me that he was innocent."

"And declares everyone else guilty," retorted Alix. "But I shall have to return to Harold, so we may as well understand one another before we part. I'll tell you how I came to see Captain Rug, and, through him, how I met Robert Ainsleigh."

Alix detailed the whole of the visit to Pitsea, and related how she had found the address of the sailor; also she explained how it came about that suspicion rested on Captain Rug. Mrs. Brady, with her eyes fixed

on the girl's face, listened with great composure, and did not venture a remark until the recital was ended. But her expression changed several times when the narrative dealt with the secret visit of Robert Ainsleigh to Blastorne.

"Gilbert is a worse man than I thought," she said with an effort. "I heard quite a different story from him. He denied that Robert had visited this place."

"Did he not tell you when you were at the inn on that evening?"

"No. He kept his own counsel then. Only when I became suspicious did he acknowledge that Robert had been in this house."

"Oh!" Alix raised her eyebrows. "Then he did admit that. I understood you to say that he denied the whole thing."

"At first. But later, when I guessed"—Mrs. Brady checked herself, and for one moment turned over the situation in her own mind. "I'll tell you everything I know from the beginning," she said quickly, "then you will be able to understand my position, and see how I have been, in a measure, deceived by Gilbert."

"I expect he has deceived you, without measure," said Alix coolly.

Mrs. Brady sighed. "I begin to think he has," said she. "Oh! what fools women are, and I the biggest of them"; then she glanced at her watch-bracelet. "We have very little time," she added abruptly. "Listen," and at once she began her story, telling it hurriedly, as though she expected to be interrupted before she could get it finished.

"I have known the Ainsleigh brothers for many years," she said; "they are twins, you know, and exactly alike in looks. Only it seems to me that Gilbert has all

the bad qualities and Robert all the good. But Gilbert has a strong will, and Robert a weak one. Gilbert always dominated Robert. He spent his own money, left by their father, and then squandered Robert's income. It was Mrs. Bendeavour, I believe, who saved what was left of Robert's money. She threatened to go to the family lawyer and tell something she knew about Gilbert, so that he was forced to leave Robert alone. Then, finding that source of income cut off, he looked about for a rich wife. At first he came after me, as he saw that I was foolish enough to be fond of him. He wanted me to elope with him, but I refused. Brady never did treat me well, but I had my boy Tony to think of, and, moreover, I had no wish to lose my good name. An actress has to be very careful, Miss Parsons. There are always people ready to throw mud at her."

"From what I have heard, no mud was ever thrown at you, Mrs. Brady."

"No," said the other woman with pride, "my position has always been a good one. I never lost my head over any man; but I am bound to confess to you what I would not confess to anyone else—that I nearly did lose my head over Gilbert Ainsleigh. However, I refused to run away, much as he wished it. He knew that I made my own money, you see," explained Mrs. Brady bitterly, "and so didn't mind the divorce. But I did, and for the time being was strong enough to send him about his business. Then he paid attentions to Miss Barbara Blastorne, and married in an evil hour."

"For her, poor lady," said Alix; "and perhaps," she added significantly, "for himself also."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Mrs. Brady again, with a piercing glance—then, without waiting for a reply, went on: "No. Don't tell me. Deal with

Gilbert as you like; after his treatment of me I shall never see him again. But, oh!"—she flung up her arms theatrically—"how shall I live out my life alone?"

"Much better than if you lived it with Gilbert," retorted Alix. "Believe me, everything is turning out for the best. Please go on."

"I must tell you about Robert then. He really has sciatica, as Mrs. Bendeavour told you. Gilbert recommended him to take morphia to make the pain easier to bear, and then Robert became a slave to the drug."

"As did Gilbert later," supplemented Alix.

Mrs. Brady frowned. "I don't quite understand that," she muttered, "Gilbert is much too clever a man to be a slave to anything or to anyone. He certainly did take the drug a few months ago, but when Mrs. Ainsleigh died, he left it off. Now, one does not leave morphia off so suddenly without a reason."

"Remorse——"

"Pooh! Gilbert does not know the meaning of that word." Mrs. Brady frowned again. "No. There was some reason for Gilbert imitating Robert's vice. But we'll discuss that when you know more. Robert, as I said, took to morphia, and his brain softened. Mrs. Bendeavour looked after him as she does now, and Gilbert occasionally took Robert for a day's pleasure. You may think it strange, Miss Parsons, but in a queer way Gilbert loves his brother."

"I don't think it at all strange," said Alix promptly. "Remember what Shakespeare says, 'There lives some soul of good in all things evil.'"

Mrs. Brady laughed. "It's carrying coals to Newcastle to quote Shakespeare to an actress," she said smiling, then her expression changed again to a hard

one. "To continue. Gilbert married Miss Blastorne, and afterwards confessed to me that he was unhappy, as he loved me still."

"And you believed him?"

The head of the other woman drooped. "I did at the time," she sighed; "you can have no idea how charming Gilbert Ainsleigh can be."

"Oh, yes, I have," said Alix, quite grimly for so pretty a girl. "He tried his fascinations on me, without much effect."

"Ah, but you had already met Harold, who is charming in another way," said Mrs. Brady; "and then, as I say, we women take strange fancies. Well, then, Gilbert was unhappy, and said that he took morphia to make life with his wife bearable. I rebuked him, but he would not stop taking the drug. Then he told me about the haunted Grange——"

"Oh, that is all rubbish," said Alix quickly.

"So Gilbert thought; but his wife was quite sure that the ghost—if one can say so—existed. Mrs. Ainsleigh, as I understood from Gilbert, was making herself ill over the matter, and wanted to let the Grange, and go abroad. Is that not true?"

Alix admitted the fact reluctantly. "Mrs. Ainsleigh did believe in the ghost, and thought that travel for a few years would be best for her."

"Well, then," went on the other, "Gilbert did not want to travel, and wished to prove to his wife, so he said, that the ghost was a myth. He thought that if he dressed up as a Cistercian monk and appeared, and let Mrs. Ainsleigh then find out that her presumed ghost was flesh and blood, that she would get over her superstition."

"Oh!" cried Alix indignantly, "and Mrs. Ainsleigh

had heart disease. Her husband knew that if she saw the ghost she might die."

Mrs. Brady rose and placed her hand on her heart. "I swear to you, Miss Parsons, that I never knew this," she said, "else I would never have given Gilbert the monk's dress."

"What! You did that?"

"I did, and with the best intentions. I thought that if Mrs. Ainsleigh were cured that Gilbert might be more happy, as her superstition apparently wrecked her nerves, and made her difficult to get on with. I had produced a play in which several Cistercian monks figured, and some of the dresses I had kept. Gilbert asked me to bring one to Blastorne, so that he might trick his wife into dismissing her foolish fancies. I came on that Sunday evening and brought the dress."

Alix thought. "I remember. Harold said that you had given Gilbert a parcel."

"It contained the dress. Then I went away in a motor which a friend of mine was driving me in. I intended to go back to Sir George Tyke's house, where I was stopping. Just outside Blastorne the motor broke down, and while it was being repaired I went for a stroll. I thought I might see Gilbert again, and came to the postern gate of the park. There I waited, but later saw a man coming, and left."

"That must have been Captain Rug."

"I don't know who he was. I did not wish to be seen. I had my good name to consider, you see, and Mrs. Ainsleigh, who knew about me, was very jealous. It was about nine that I left the postern gate, and then, as I did not think the motor would be repaired, I walked round the park. It was ten o'clock when I went back to the motor. It was repaired in a way, and we started off.

A few miles on it broke down again, and we were many hours getting to Tilbury. I then crossed the river, and got to Sir George Tyke's about midnight. But you can see, Miss Parsons, that about the time of the murder I was in the neighbourhood, and had no one to prove where I was. As Gilbert said, I could easily have entered the house and committed the crime."

"I don't see that at all," said Alix indignantly; "you could not enter a house of which you knew nothing."

"No; and—yet. Wait; I'll go on. When I heard of the murder I was astonished, particularly when I heard that Mrs. Ainsleigh had been killed by a supposed ghost in a monk's dress. When Gilbert came to town he saw me and explained that he had left the dress in his room, and that someone had put it on and had killed his wife."

"Then whom did he suspect?"

"He said your father was guilty. Afterwards I went to Pitsea to see Mrs. Bendeavour, whom I knew for many years. She let slip that Robert had been to Blastorne on Sunday, so I went back and accused Gilbert of having induced Robert to commit the crime. Gilbert said that Robert had certainly been at Blastorne on that evening, as he wished to present him to his wife. But when Robert arrived he was in a bad way owing to the drug. Gilbert then said that he left the dress and Robert in his room, and came down to dinner. He went away to sleep in the pagoda, and during that time Robert must have put on the dress and have killed Mrs. Ainsleigh."

"But why should he kill her?"

"Because he was mad with the morphia, and perhaps got frightened. But I am quite sure that Robert is guilty."

"It looks like it," mused Alix; "and yet the story is rather ridiculous, Mrs. Brady. Why should Robert put on a monk's dress?"

The actress shrugged her shoulders. "Who can account for the vagaries of a lunatic?" said she scornfully. "But I held my tongue, as I thought Robert killed the woman when he didn't know what he was about. Certainly I should have spoken out had anyone been arrested, but until then I held my peace. Then Youle told me that Gilbert was engaged to you, and I had a quarrel. I insisted on his remaining true to me, but he said he wanted money, and especially that which had been wrongfully left away from him to you. He threatened that if I spoke out to clear Dr. Parsons, that he would say I had killed Mrs. Ainsleigh out of sheer jealousy. Well"—Mrs. Brady made an eloquent gesture —"you can see that, what with my having the dress, and being absent in the neighbourhood from the motor without anyone being able to swear what I was doing, that the police could have made up a very strong case against me."

"I don't think so, Mrs. Brady. If you had faced it out——"

"I had my name to think of, Miss Parsons. And please don't forget that, if I had not given way to Gilbert, your father would have been accused, or else you would have had to marry Gilbert. No; I did the best I could, as the matter is so complicated that anyone might have been arrested. I could not prove an alibi, you see, and then,"—Mrs. Brady shrugged her shoulders—"well, you know what is thought of a jealous woman: that she is capable of anything, even of murder."

"I see," said Alix, beginning to perceive that, with such a scoundrel as Ainsleigh to deal with, Mrs. Brady's

"'I GOT IT FROM THIS GIRL. IT PROVES THAT AINSLEIGH KILLED HIS WIFE'" (*p. 245*).

position was really a difficult one. "And what's to be done now?"

Mrs. Brady rose to take her leave. "I can't say. I leave the matter in your hands. Robert Ainsleigh is guilty, so you must do as you please. I retire from the stage, Miss Parsons."

And, having cleared her character, retire she did, taking an affectionate leave of Alix. As the girl turned to remount the stairs and see how Harold was getting on, Thomson advanced, and his information rather surprised her. "If you please, miss, a party of three arrived, and Dr. Parsons took them to Mr. Youle's room. Mr. Youle, miss, is quite himself, and sent away two—a gentleman and a woman as is elderly—and kept the third, another younger woman, in his room, along with the doctor. Mr. Youle wants to see you at once, miss."

Without a word Alix turned and went quickly to the sick-room, wondering what had induced her father to introduce strangers into the room at such a time. She had a half idea of who the trio might be, and this became a whole idea when she saw Julianna Smithers seated, weeping, beside the bed. Dr. Parsons stood near her, and Harold, with his eyes very bright, was sitting up. He held a ring.

"See, Alix!" he cried, holding it out, "this is the ring which I gave Gilbert Ainsleigh, and which he said was lost. I got it from this girl, and it proves that Ainsleigh killed his wife!"

"I know," said Alix, "he induced Robert to kill her."

"He killed her himself," declared Youle forcibly.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END.

ALIX stared at her lover, and wondered whether he had lost his wits. "It is impossible that Gilbert could have killed his wife," said she quietly. "If you remember, Harold, we saw him sleeping in the pagoda at the time Mrs. Ainsleigh was strangled."

Youle bent his brows ponderingly. "I remember," he said. "There is something very clever about the whole business — diabolically clever. In some way Gilbert killed her with his own hands."

"But he could not be in two places at once," protested Parsons.

"No. And yet the ring, Alix!"—he gave it into her hands—"you recognise the stone?"

"Yes," she replied after a close examination. "It is one of the new gems you brought from Africa."

"Exactly; and cannot be imitated. I alone possess such gems, and risked my life to obtain them. Of some a necklace was made for you, and I had a ring—this ring—made for myself, containing one jewel. If you remember, Gilbert Ainsleigh took a fancy to the stone, and asked me for the ring. He wore it constantly; then—so he said—it was lost."

"Did this girl"—Alix indicated Julianna—"find it?"

"No, I didn't," growled Miss Smithers in a strong, common voice. "It was given to me by Tuckle."

"And Tuckle told you where he found it?"

"He said as he bought it to engage me, as we're going to marry."

"And keep a fish shop in Whitechapel," said Harold coolly. "I know all about that. But, you see, Alix, that if Tuckle is possessed of the ring, he must know that Gilbert killed Mrs. Ainsleigh."

Alix thought hard, but could come to no conclusion. "I can't see that, Harold, really I can't. If Gilbert lost the ring, or left it in his room, Tuckle might have found it, or might even have stolen it."

"You ain't got no right to say that, miss," growled Julianna; "my boy is as honest as the day."

"We'll soon see if he is," cried Youle quickly. "Doctor, will you please go to the inn with Miss Smithers here, and bring Tuckle along?"

"He won't come if he is guilty," said Parsons.

"Guilty of murder, do you mean?"

"Guilty of theft," said Harold.

Julianna rose in a storm of indignation. "I'm only a poor servant, and you're gentlefolk," she declared; "but it's a shame, taking away my boy's character. He wants to marry me——"

"And you're double his age," interrupted Youle. "Fifteen and thirty don't go well together, Miss Smithers."

"That ain't got nothing to do with you, sir. All I say is as Tuckle wants to marry me, and me having no other chance of getting a husband, I must take what's to hand. But marry him I shan't, if he's done anything wrong, which I don't believe he ain't," concluded Julianna incoherently. "And come back here to clear his character he will, sir, if I have to drag him by the scruff of the neck to do it," and Miss Smithers made, heavy-footed, for the door.

"Follow her, Parsons," said Youle faintly, for the excitement was too much for him.

The doctor, as a doctor, should have seen to his patient's condition, but he was too deeply concerned in the new development of affairs to trouble his head. Without even a backward glance he followed the girl out of the room, and left Alix alone with her lover. At once she flew to a side table and poured out a glass of brandy. The ardent spirit soon brought back the colour to the invalid's cheek and the light to his eyes, and his voice became stronger, although Alix implored him not to speak. "You'll make yourself worse," she said.

"Nonsense," said Harold with renewed vigour. "Things are too serious to permit of my leaving them alone. I tell you, Alix, that the truth is coming to light. If Gilbert Ainsleigh can prove that he lost that ring before the murder, I have nothing to say. If afterwards, I shall have my doubts. It all depends upon what Tuckle says."

Alix looked impatient. "I don't see how you can prove his guilt by means of the ring," she said, puzzled.

"I can. Wait till you hear this boy's story. He has been Gilbert's tool, and has lied all the way through in the hope of getting money, and also, as I believe, to protect his master, of whom he is afraid. I know what questions to put, Alix, and if they are answered as I expect you will find that Gilbert is guilty."

"But Robert——"

"Robert is innocent. Of that I am convinced. By the way, he came here to see you."

"Why?" she asked, opening her eyes wide.

"Because he has taken a great fancy to you. The

poor creature is weak in the head, and is still weaker from the fact of his taking that drug recommended by his brother for sciatica."

"Harold, Mrs. Brady said that Gilbert really is fond of his brother, and would not have given him the drug to harm him."

"He did, however. It would have been better for Robert to have borne the pain of nerves, than to have taken to a drug when he is a man of so weak a will. But Mrs. Brady? Where have you seen her?"

"She was here a few minutes ago. As you were asleep, I would not allow her to see you. We had a talk, and she told me a great deal."

"What about?"

Alix related the whole of her interview with Mrs. Brady, to which Youle listened with great attention. At the conclusion of the explanation he nodded. "Quite so. I knew that Mrs. Brady had given the dress. I guessed it when I saw the photograph of the play in her drawing-room. She is innocent enough, and I wonder she was such a fool as to think that the police would arrest her. Gilbert played on her fears, and, of course, she wished to avoid a scandal. I am glad she has given the man up. He's a bad lot. He killed his wife and tried to kill me, and would have hanged Mrs. Brady or your father without compunction had he been able to attain his end. But we'll soon place him in such a position that he will not be able to do any more harm. Wait till I see Tuckle."

"And what about Mrs. Bendeavour?"

"Oh, she is with Robert downstairs in the library. You can see them later, Alix. As soon as Robert has seen you he will go away. But he bothered the old woman to bring him, and she had to yield. She also

brought Julianna, so it is just as well she came. Had Julianna not come with Mrs. Bendeavour, I should not have spotted that ring, or have been able to bring home the crime to Gilbert."

"I don't see how you can do so now," said Alix, perplexed.

"Wait, wait. Ah! I hear footsteps. Alix, see if that is your father?"

It was not only Dr. Parsons, but Julianna, leading the reluctant Tuckle by the arm. The lad's pasty face expressed alarm, and he eyed the inquisitor on the bed with a doubtful expression in his sharp eyes.

"Come here," said Youle sharply. "Dr. Parsons, you can remain by the door. Miss Smithers, sit by the bed. No, Tuckle, you can stand. I have a few questions to ask you."

"I'm sure I ain't done nothing," whimpered Tuckle, putting his dirty knuckles in his eyes. "What's a cove hauled here for?"

"'Cause you've got to clear your character, as I told you," said Julianna, sternly, and gave him a shake before she sat down. "What do you mean by giving me rings as ain't yours?"

Tuckle started, and turned red, while Harold watched him closely. "I picked up that ring," he said, doggedly, "and findings is keepings."

"Quite so," said Youle, his eyes dominating those of Tuckle, "and you picked up that ring in the parlour, when you were set to watch the corpse of Mrs. Ainsleigh."

"I didn't," howled the boy. "I didn't——"

"You liar!"

"I ain't a liar. I picked up that ring nowhere."

"You said you did just now."

"Well, what's a cove to do, when he's driven so hard?" grumbled Tuckle.

"A cove's got to tell the whole truth," said Youle sharply. "See here, my boy, you have lied to no purpose about Dr. Parsons. You said that you picked up the cross in the parlour. That was a lie, for the cross you found in the bedroom, when you went to get the cigar-holder. But you did pick up something beside the dead body, and that was the ring."

"I never did."

"Don't contradict. Mr. Ainsleigh got that ring from me, and always wore it. I saw it on his hand on the night Mrs. Ainsleigh was killed. Afterwards I noticed that he did not wear it. Tuckle, confess at once that Mr. Ainsleigh lost the ring in the parlour during the struggle with his wife, and that you found it. Confess, also, that when you told Mr. Ainsleigh that he persuaded you to hold your tongue, and to say that you picked up Dr. Parsons' cross so as to incriminate him. Confess that you played the part of the ghost seen by Mrs. Allison and Old Barnacles, and that, to make yourself taller, you carried a stick to raise the hood. Confess that Gilbert told you to do this."

"Gilbert?" giggled the boy, now shaking with nervous fear.

"Mr. Ainsleigh. You know perfectly well whom I mean. Confess what part you have taken in all this business, or I'll have you arrested."

"And if I confess?" whimpered Tuckle, wetting his dry lips.

"I'll have Ainsleigh arrested, for he killed his wife."

"You'll have master arrested?" said the page, and a strange look crossed his face. "Well, I thought you'd——" He stopped.

"What does he mean by that?" asked Alix, noting the boy's behaviour.

"Some wickedness," put in Parsons indignantly. "To think that an inferior menial like this should accuse me of murder. Oh!" and he snorted.

Meantime Harold was thinking. After a steady gaze at Tuckle's face and downcast eyes, he turned to Julianna.

"Did you tell the boy about the ring at the inn?"

"Yes," she said, with an angry glance at Tuckle, "and made him come along at once to clear his character, else he'll never be my husband."

"Was the boy out of your sight at the inn after you told him why he was wanted?"

"He went for a few minutes to get his cap," said Julianna.

"Oh! that was the excuse, was it?" said Youle triumphantly; then addressed himself to Tuckle. "So you sent a telegram to Ainsleigh warning him that the game was up, did you?"

"I don't know what you mean, sir," said Tuckle, changing colour again.

"Pshaw! you know well enough. The mention of that ring showed that you were wanted here to explain how it came into your possession. You knew that your explanation would inculpate Ainsleigh, and you seized the opportunity, while presumably searching for your cap, to send a wire to London telling him to fly."

"I never——"

"Doctor," interrupted Harold sharply, "go downstairs and send a groom to Helstone for Inspector Unwin."

"What for?" yelped Tuckle in dismay.

"To have you arrested."

"Oh, no, sir—no, sir!" Tuckle dropped on his knees. "I'll tell everything you want me to. Only don't let them put me in quod!"

"It's much worse than that, Tuckle. If arrested, you will probably be hanged for being concerned in the murder of Mrs. Ainsleigh."

"Oh, lord—oh, lord!" Tuckle dropped in a heap. "I never touched her. It was master, I swear—he killed her!"

"And you found the ring in the parlour when you were set to watch?"

"No," replied Tuckle, with his face on the ground, so that his voice was muffled. "I pulled it off his finger."

"Parsons, set him on his feet."

The doctor waddled up to the prostrate lad and hauled him to an upright position. Julianna, stern and unforgiving, pushed forward her chair, whence she had arisen, and Tuckle, weeping and trembling, dropped into the seat.

"Where did you pull it off Mr. Ainsleigh's finger?" asked Harold.

"In the passage. When I was searching for the doctor's cigar-holder I heard a howling and crying, and came running along the passage to see what was up. Just as I got to the stairs I see a monk coming out of the parlour and run along. He come past me on his way to the West Wing. I thought he was the ghost at first, but I wasn't afeard, 'cause I don't believe in no such things. But I thought it would please old missus if he was caught, so I grabbed his dress. He tried to get away, but said nothing, and kept the hood over his head. I dropped the dress and caught his left hand as he tried to push me off. He pulled and pulled, but I held on. The ring was loose on his finger, so I pulled it off; but

he was so anxious to get away, as someone was pulling at the parlour door from inside, that he bolted towards the West Wing without thinking of the ring. Then I looked at it, and saw it was one that master wore. I didn't know what he'd been doing, but I slipped the ring into my pocket, and ran back to the doctor's room at once."

"Why did you do that?"

"'Cause I thought master had been up to something, and I'd get some money out of it, if I knew, and pretended I didn't know."

"You young scoundrel!"

"I had to do the best I could for myself, sir," said Tuckle sulkily, "me being a pore boy. Then I comes along later, when everyone was talking, and you collared me."

"And you lied to me," said Harold sternly.

"Well, sir," said the boy pertly, "I saw that master had murdered missus, and knew that I was made for life."

"Oh," groaned the doctor, "what a blackmailer!"

"And Ainsleigh employed you to execute all these other tricks so as to avert suspicion from him?"

"Yes," said Tuckle crossly; "and I ain't done nothing wrong."

Harold would have replied sharply to the iniquitous brat, but that he was seized with another attack of faintness, and could scarcely speak. All he could say was to warn Alix to keep hold of Tuckle, and then he fell back insensible. Alix flew to his assistance, but Dr. Parsons ordered her to take Tuckle and Miss Smithers away, and attended himself to his patient. Therefore the girl unwillingly left the room, followed by Julianna, who was holding her head very high, and taking abso-

"'I HAVE COME TO PAY YOU A VISIT, YOULE,' SAID GILBERT AINSLEIGH" (*p. 255*).

lutely no notice of the downcast Tuckle. He walked after her like a prisoner being led to justice.

Harold soon revived, but still was weak. The loss of blood and the excitement of the moment made him incapable of continuing the examination of Tuckle. However, he gave orders that Inspector Unwin was to be sent for, and that Tuckle was to be kept a close prisoner until he could be handed over to the proper authorities. Then he went to sleep, and woke up to have some food about eight o'clock. Alix entered and chatted to him for a few minutes.

"I saw Mrs. Bendeavour and Robert," she said, "and they went back to Pitsea by a late train. Julianna is here, but will not have anything to do with Tuckle. The Inspector will be here in the morning. Now, do try and go to sleep, Harold, while I watch beside you during the night."

"No, dear, I am all right now. Neither you nor your father need watch. Come and see me at eight in the morning. I'll sleep round the clock."

Alix thought that this was a good thing for her lover in his weak condition, so, after making him comfortable for the night, she went away, and only peeped in at ten o'clock to say "Good night."

Harold slept for a time, but woke about midnight. The blind was up, and the moonlight was pouring into the room. He lay comfortable enough, half asleep and half awake, dozing luxuriously, when he became aware that someone was in the room. He heard the door being locked, and the figure came to his bed-side, and sat down.

"I have come to pay you a visit, Youle," said Gilbert Ainsleigh; "you and I have to reckon with each other."

CHAPTER XXV.

A CONFESSION.

HAROLD thought that he was dreaming still. How could Gilbert Ainsleigh have entered his room at this hour of the night? And what did he mean by talking of a reckoning between them? It must be a dream! He rubbed his eyes and yawned, and again looked at his companion. Gilbert had seated himself in a chair by the bed, in the very chair which Alix had vacated a few hours since, and was now lighting a cigarette. The fumes of the smoke made Harold more wakeful, and then he recognised that the unwelcome and unexpected intruder was Gilbert Ainsleigh in his proper person.

"What are you doing here?" demanded the sick man, raising himself on his elbow. "Are you not aware that you run the risk of arrest?"

Gilbert laughed, and crossed one leg over the other. "Of course," said he, with an assumed lightness; "that useful boy Tuckle sent a wire to my London rooms saying that you had found out about the ring and had sent for him. I knew well that Tuckle, clever and faithful as he is, would have to tell the truth. From your late remark about arrest I infer that he has spoken."

"He has confessed that he pulled the ring from the finger of the monk who murdered Mrs. Ainsleigh. And as no one but you possessed a ring with such a unique stone, I am certain——"

"That I am the murderer. But what if I gave the

ring to my brother, Mr. Youle? He was in the house, remember."

Harold had never thought of this contingency. "You need not lay the blame on that unfortunate brother of yours," he said, uneasily and angrily; "he is perfectly innocent."

"You will have to prove that," snapped Gilbert; but the cigarette shook in his hand. The moonlight was fairly strong, and although the face of Gilbert was in the shadow, the lower part of his body, and his hands, were in the thin, cold light.

"I think that can be done by Tuckle. He saw your face, remember."

"The young liar!" Gilbert spoke violently. "He could not have done that. The hood was over my face."

"Oh, indeed!" said Youle, calmly, and noting the trap into which Ainsleigh had fallen; "so it was you after all?"

"I did not say that," retorted the other quickly.

"You inferred as much. At all events, whatever defence you will set up, I think you will find it hard to escape hanging."

"I don't intend to be hanged, or even arrested," said Gilbert savagely. "You have won the game, which you have played so cleverly. But for you the truth would never have been found out. As it is, I am quite aware of my danger; and I am aware also, that unless I can bring the crime home to Robert I must submit to my doom."

"Robert is innocent. You brought him here so as to implicate him in the murder, if necessary. Also, you tried to implicate Captain Rug by making him come to the postern gate. Mrs. Brady also was accused by you, because of the accident to the motor and her subse-

quent wandering round the place alone, which prevented her offering an alibi."

"You forget Dr. Parsons," said Gilbert jeeringly. "I could get up a case against him also."

"I quite believe it. My only wonder is that you did not try to make out that Tuckle had strangled your wife."

"I had other uses for the boy," said Gilbert tartly.

"Naturally. You used him as a shield for your crime."

Gilbert was silent for a few minutes, and shook off the ash of his cigarette on to the floor. "You seem very certain that I am personally responsible for the death of my wife."

"With my whole heart I believe you strangled her yourself."

"And yet you and Alix saw me in the pagoda asleep."

"I know that. I can't understand how you brought the matter about."

"Had I time after you left me to get into the house, assume the dress, and enter the parlour and kill my wife?"

"No. We were only a few minutes in getting under the parlour window."

"In that case I must be innocent. I can call you and Alix as witnesses to prove an alibi."

"But the ring?"

"I gave that to Robert."

"I don't believe it. Besides, you admitted that Tuckle could not have seen your face, and thereby showed that *you* were the disguised man."

"I admit that to you, but I would do so to no one else," said Gilbert, laughing coldly. "What takes place between us here will never be known, Mr. Youle."

"You intend to stab me, then?" said Harold, lying perfectly still. "I am at your mercy. I have no weapon, and I am weak with illness. If you choose to be a coward—but you are one already, else you would scarcely have murdered a harmless old lady, and one to whom you owed so much."

"You had better keep a civil tongue in your head," said Gilbert; and his voice shook with rage. "I have quite enough to bear as it is, without listening to your taunts, Mr. Youle. You have the money and the girl I love——"

"The girl you love? Pah!"

"Sneer as you like; Alix Parsons is the woman I love. I have always loved her, and would have married her——"

"If she would have accepted you."

"If I had possessed sufficient money," corrected the other quietly. "Her father was on my side, and she would have yielded."

"I don't think so."

"I do. I know that Alix has developed a will lately, but in those days she obeyed her father, and I knew quite enough of Dr. Parsons' secrets to make him do what I want. But I am accustomed to luxury, and therefore was forced to marry money."

"Your vices forced you."

"Perhaps. But of those vices, morphia-taking was not one."

"Oh!" Harold drew the clothes more comfortably up to his chin. "I guessed long ago that you never really took morphia to excess. You were playing a game, for some reason which I cannot tell you."

"Can't you guess?"

"No. Only I am certain that the reason had to do

with the death of your wife. Why did you marry the poor lady if you intended to kill her?"

"I never intended to kill her. But I grew weary of her. I wanted her to give me half her income and then divorce me. In that case I could have married Alix, and been happy for life. But Barbara perhaps guessed my intentions, and refused to give me anything more than the poor five hundred a year which she settled on me at our marriage. I grew weary of being tied to a woman I did not love, and of seeing constantly in the house a girl I adored."

"Yet you intended, when freed by your own act, to marry Mrs. Brady."

"I did, because Barbara, by making a new will, left me penniless. Had she not tricked me in that way, I should have got the money and have made Alix my wife."

"In spite of the fact that she was engaged to me."

Gilbert gave a low laugh. "Oh, you saw how easily I arranged that."

"By accusing an innocent man of a murder of which you were the perpetrator," said Harold scornfully.

"I admit that."

"You do?" cried Youle, wondering at the hardihood of the man.

"To you, but to no one else," said Ainsleigh rapidly. "You fool; do you think I would speak so freely to you, unless I knew that you were in my power?"

"I don't see what good that will do," retorted Youle sneeringly. "Tuckle is the principal witness against you. Kill me, and you only add to your crimes, yet do no good to yourself."

"I may be able to get rid of Tuckle also," said Gilbert, lighting another cigarette in the most nonchalant

manner. "He is sleeping in the house, remember. I know every room and passage——"

"Including the secret one."

"Quite so. I entered by the secret passage. Even Barbara did not know that it existed. I found it when looking over some old family papers in the muniment room. Thinking the information might be useful I kept it to myself, and searched for the passage. It gives admittance by a panel into a room in the West Wing, which is, if you remember, uninhabited. The passage comes out into an old well near the postern gate, halfway down, above the level of the water. Rough stones project from the sides of the well, and one can climb up. To close the passage I expect the well had only to be filled with water, and the means of entrance was sealed. But how the well can be filled I confess I do not know. The water, to my knowledge, has always remained at the same level. But as the door into the passage is some way down, and the well is dark, no one ever suspected the truth. Well?"

"Well?" echoed Youle, calmly; "what do you expect me to say? You found the secret passage and made use of it in that ghost business."

Gilbert laughed again. "Yes. I knew that my wife had heart disease, and thought that the ghost might frighten her. I used an ordinary monastic robe on several occasions, until I procured a genuine Cistercian dress from Mrs. Brady. Some of the servants saw me, but I don't think Barbara ever did. Parsons saw me in the gallery. I assure you, Youle, that I never intended to strangle my wife."

"You intended to frighten her to death?"

"Yes; but that is an easy death."

"Ainsleigh, you are a scoundrel!"

"Pooh! What is the use of your calling me names? You have done your worst; now you will see what I can do. Ah! would you?"

Harold's hand had been creeping stealthily towards the silken cord of the electric bell, which swung from the top of the bed. Ainsleigh saw his hand shoot up in the semi-gloom, and snatched it away. So weak was Youle that he could not struggle, so the other removed the cord to a safe distance. "There is no use waking the household from sleep," said Ainsleigh coolly; "they will be up and doing sharp enough when I am done with you."

"What do you mean to do?" asked Harold; and brave man as he was he felt a qualm. It seemed so terrible to lie there at the mercy of this unscrupulous scoundrel, to be done to death like a sheep in the shambles. "Weak as I am, I'll fight."

Gilbert waved his hand. "There will be no need to fight," he said. "I have no wish for a rough and tumble now. Wait till you hear what I have to say, and then you will find what the punishment is that I design for you, who have ruined my life."

This was a pleasant way for a murderer to talk, and Harold scarcely knew how much of the speech was truth or mere bravado. However, he was so helpless that all he could do was to lie still and listen to the agreeable tale told by his enemy.

"I shan't keep you long," said Ainsleigh, seeing that his victim made no sign. "Time is pressing"—he glanced at his watch in the clear moonlight—"and I have to be far away by morning. I am going from here to Gravesend, Youle—a motor car which I borrowed from a friend is waiting for me at the postern gate in charge of someone on whom I can rely. At Gravesend

I can catch a steamer that sails in the morning. I won't tell you where I am going, and it really doesn't matter much, as you will be past harming me."

"Then you are going to kill me?" said Harold again.

"I am going to dispose of you," Gilbert assured him coolly. "You know now how I can escape from the Grange after settling you. But you do not know how I killed my wife."

"You admit it, then?"

Gilbert made an impatient gesture. "How wearisome you are, Youle! We agreed to come to that conclusion some time ago. Yes; I did kill my wife, because I wanted to marry Alix; because she wearied me, because she would not give me money, and, in short, because I wished to get rid of her. She found out too much about me, and I have not a clean past, I regret to say."

"So I should imagine," sneered Harold.

"For a man who is on the point of extinction you are uncommonly cool, my dear fellow," said Gilbert calmly. "Well, I'll try and make you suffer as little as possible, as I am not a brutal man. The suspense is the worst thing you will have to bear."

"Oh, drop talking, and tell me how you killed your wife."

"Humph! You wish to carry the information with you into the next world," said Ainsleigh; "well, so be it. Far be it from me that I should deny you this last pleasure. Well, then, I tried, as I said, to frighten Barbara with the ghost, hoping she would die of her heart. But she lived, so I was obliged to adopt stronger measures. I pretended to take morphia, and I really did take sufficient to make me more resemble my brother Robert."

"I see; you wished to place the crime on his shoulders."

"Of course. That was why I brought him down secretly. I took him to London, and said that I would introduce him to my wife. He therefore came down with me to Gravesend on that occasion, when I went up to town after the quarrel with my wife. I really went then because she told me who Captain Rug was, and gave me his address, so as to settle the matter. Remembering that he had threatened Barbara, I fancied if there was trouble over the murder that I could bring home the crime to him, and save poor Robert."

"You infernal scoundrel; I know how you brought Rug to the postern."

"Oh, do you? Then it will save me making my story too long. Well, then, Robert was pretty bad with the drug—dazed, and easily managed. I brought him to Gravesend, and then in my friend's motor car, here, late at night. I sent away the motor car and brought Robert into the West Wing by the secret passage. He was pretty dazed with the drug, and it was no easy matter to get him down the well, as he was frightened. I left him in a disused room in the West Wing, and then made my appearance at breakfast to make it up with my wife."

"Whom you intended to murder?"

"It was her own fault," said Gilbert coolly, "as she would not give me the money I wanted. I kept Robert in the West Wing, and quiet, by giving him plenty of the drug. On Sunday I dressed him in a suit of old evening clothes which I possessed, and drugged him deeply, so that he might sleep. When you were at dinner, and I retired, I went to the West Wing, and carried Robert out by a side door into the pagoda."

"Why not by the secret passage?"

"I could not have got an insensible man up that well," retorted Gilbert.

"And I don't think you could have carried him, either."

"Oh, but I did. I am something of an athlete, you know, and am much stronger than you think. I don't say that it was an easy task; but I managed when the servants were at supper, and you at dinner, to place Robert on the form in the pagoda, and throw a cloak over him."

"I see; so when Alix and I came we thought Robert was you?"

"Of course. Robert and I are very much alike, and, of course, my indulgence in the drug made us still more alike. I thus provided an alibi, you understand."

"You clever scoundrel!" said Youle, hardly able to hide his admiration at this diabolic ingenuity. "Well?"

"You can guess the rest," said Ainsleigh with a shrug, and rising. "I waited till you and Alix had gone into the garden, and Parsons was in the billiard-room. The servants were still at supper. I then put on the monk's dress, and went into the parlour. I thought that my mere appearance would startle my wife, and perhaps kill her; but she started up and caught at the hood. It fell off, and she knew me at once. I was so angry that I—I—well, I strangled her. Then I heard the cry of Alix, and the noise of your scrambling up. I fled, as you know, and slipped through the door, locking it behind me. If that brat Tuckle had not met me, and collared the ring, no one would have been a bit the wiser. As it was, I had to make him my accomplice and bribe him."

"He knows all?"

"Of course, and has known all for many a day. Well, I went back to my room, and took off the dress. When everyone was within, excited by the death, I slipped out and brought Robert back by the side door."

"But the servants——?"

"They were on the other side of the house, and so were you all. I counted on that. It was a risk, of course, but it had to be taken. I got Robert back to the West Wing, still insensible, and then returned and lay down in the pagoda, when I was awakened by yourself and the doctor to play my part of chief mourner."

"Ainsleigh, you make me sick."

"I'll make you worse before I've done," was the rejoinder. "Late that night I took Robert out of the house by the secret passage. He could get about by that time, and then——"

"You met Rug at the gate, and Barnacles, for the sake of Rug, drove both out of the district. I know that."

"Then you know more than is good for you. Not that it matters," added Ainsleigh suavely. "I'll settle you shortly. Is there anything else you want to know?"

"Yes," said Harold coolly, although he knew that he was lying in the shadow of death. "Did you shoot at me?"

"I did; but unfortunately did not kill you!"

"Thanks," said Youle lightly. "One other question. Did Tuckle pretend to be the ghost seen by Mrs. Allison?"

"Yes; by my direction, so as to avert suspicion. He was not tall enough, and elevated the hood of the dress on a stick. Someone tore it off."

"Old Barnacles did, and it passed into my possession."

"Oh; so that old rip interfered. I wish I could punish him also, but I have not the time. Well, anything else?"

"Did Dr. Parsons know anything of this matter?"

"No. I could not trust him, as he is a fool, and timid. However, I placed him in a sufficiently difficult position to make him think twice before he offended me."

"Tuckle, then, was the sole person who knew that you were guilty?"

"Yes, and if he had split I could have made it hot for him."

"He has split," Harold reminded the man.

"Well, then, I'll keep my promise, and make things hot for him. Very hot for all, my dear friend. I intend to set the Grange on fire."

Youle tried to spring out of bed. "You devil!"

Ainsleigh jeered, and laughingly held him down. "I long ago stacked stuff soaked in petroleum in the secret passage. I had intended to burn down the house to get rid of Barbara, but ended her life in another way. But the fire will finish you and Tuckle and Alix. This is an old place, and will burn like tinder."

"Let me go!" Youle, frenzied with horror at the danger which was coming to Alix, struggled vehemently, but could do nothing in his weak state against an athlete like Gilbert. Further, when he fell back for a moment exhausted, Ainsleigh whipped out a handkerchief, and pressed it over the sick man's mouth.

"How do you like chloroform?" jeered the villain.

"Let me—let me——" mumbled Youle, but his voice grew weak, and his struggles less violent. In a minute or two he was quite unconscious, and lay on the bed still

as death. Gilbert lighted a match and held it to his face. Then he laughed.

"You're done for," said Gilbert; "now for the fire. I have lost all, but my enemies shall gain nothing," and he left the room quickly to complete the measure of his iniquity.

CHAPTER XXVI.

FIRE!

ALIX PARSONS was sound asleep and dreaming of Harold. She was standing by his side, as she thought, before the altar, and the ring was being placed on her finger. Overhead the wedding bells clashed joyously. They became so loud that she woke, and then became aware that the clamour of the bells still continued. The many bells resolved themselves into one, and this was ringing furiously. Half asleep she sprang out of bed, with a vague sense of danger. The moment her feet alighted on the carpet her senses returned with a rush, and she knew that the alarm bell of the Grange was ringing like a tocsin. "What is wrong?" Alix asked herself, while dressing rapidly, and her thoughts flew to Harold, who lay in his room near the West Wing. Hardly had she completed a light toilet when a loud rapping came to her door, and she opened it to see her father standing on the threshold, as pale as a corpse, and half dressed.

"Alix! Alix! come out; the Grange is on fire!"

"Harold! Harold!" wailed the girl, and flew into the passage, only bent upon saving her lover.

Parsons guessed as much, and ran after her, seizing her by the wrist. "You can do nothing," he gasped. "The West Wing is in a blaze, and Youle's room is cut off. He must burn."

"He shall not burn!" shrieked the girl, and tore her

wrist from his grasp. "Harold—oh! Harold, my darling!"

The bell was still ringing furiously, and the front portion of the house was filled with servants in various stages of undress, and all more or less overcome with terror. Thomson met his mistress.

"Oh, miss," he cried, "what a mercy Tuckle woke up and smelt the fire, else we might all have been burnt in our beds!"

"Tuckle!"

"He rang the bell at once. The villagers are on the lawn, the engine has been sent for, to Helstone. Oh, what will we——?"

Alix stopped to hear no more. She darted past the butler, and sped along the passage towards the West Wing. Just as she was nearing Harold's room a burst of flame and smoke drove her back. Nevertheless, she made a bold effort to get through, and, gasping, struggling, fighting every inch, she crawled along the floor, holding her shawl across her mouth. The fire roared like a beast of prey, the passage was filled with dreadful flame, and she knew that Harold was in the midst of this fiery furnace, cut off from all human aid. In vain, by pressing her face to the floor, and crawling near the walls, did she strive to break through the barrier. The floor grew hot, little spirals of smoke came through the cracks, and then thin jets of flame. With a sense of despair, blistered hands, and a stifling shortness of breath, Alix had to confess that she was beaten, and slipped back into safety.

In some way, she knew not how, she managed to gain the grand staircase, and reeled down the stairs towards the hall door, which was open. Emerging from the house, she saw a crowd of villagers, men, women

and children, on the lawn, also many servants, who were running about as though they were mad. Her father, white and shaking, was standing at the foot of the steps, and the bell had ceased its clangour. Alix sprang down the steps, and grasped her father's hand. "The West Wing, the window of Harold's room. Come! come!" she gasped.

"It is too late—it is too late!" wailed Parsons.

"It is not too late!" cried the girl fiercely. "I'll save him or die with him. Thomson! Herne! Stavely!" she shouted to the servants who stood helplessly about. "Come round. Save Mr. Youle—the West Wing," and she ran round the corner of the house along the terrace, followed by the men.

The shrubbery, the wall round the park, the postern gate—all these were illuminated in the fierce red glare from the burning Grange. As in a dream Alix saw that the postern gate was open, but never gave this a thought. All her mind was bent upon saving Harold Youle, who lay on the first storey, helpless in bed. That he was insensible she did not know—that he could not move by reason of his wounded ankle she was well aware. The West Wing vomited flames and smoke from every window, but the fire had not yet reached Harold's room. She saw the window plain enough, and the red tongues of flame were creeping nearer to it with terrific speed.

"A ladder—a ladder!" she cried to the men now grouped around her.

"Theer's none long enough to reach the window," said Herne the groom. "We must wait for the Helstone fire-brigade."

"And Harold will be burnt to death by that time," cried Alix, turning her distorted white face on the speaker. "You coward! Five hundred pounds to the

man who fetches out Mr. Youle!" There was no response. "A thousand pounds! Two thousand pounds! Oh, my God! Is there none of you man enough to save a man's life?"

A tongue of flame shot across the window of Youle's room, and Alix shrieked and wrung her hands. She would have attempted the rescue herself, but had not the physical strength to lower Harold, even had she good fortune enough to reach him. It seemed as though death would claim him before her very eyes.

"Save him—oh, father! Oh, Harold, Harold! Let me—let me——" She rushed forward, but Thomson held her back.

"It is useless, miss. See, the flames have burst out of the window."

"I must, I must—let me go—you coward—you mean—mean——" Alix struggled and cried; then, with a sudden faintness, fell on the grass. Thomson pulled her back, and some women servants took possession of her. "Harold! Harold!" she continued to cry heartrendingly. "Oh, God! will no one save him?"

Then a strange thing happened. Dr. Parsons, the timid, shy, nervous man, who whimpered and winced at the little troubles of life, suddenly became a hero. Before the eyes of all, stirred by his daughter's agony, he went Baresark. The cowardliness and feebleness of his ordinary self went away suddenly, and a great wave of determination braced his frame to save Harold Youle or die. He went as Baresark as any Viking, and his mean, squat figure dilated as he ran shouting forward. Alix, on her elbows prone on the grass, saw him race up the terrace and fling himself against the wall of the house. A dead silence of amazement fell upon those who knew what a coward the man ordinarily was, and

nothing could be heard but the roar of the flames and the crackling of the beams within the house.

"He's mad—he's mad!" breathed Thomson, and everyone else thought the same as the butler.

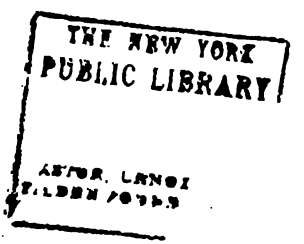
Against the wall the ivy grew thick, and Parsons, grasping the tough roots and stems, swarmed up like an athlete. Higher and higher he went, watched by the silent crowd below, until his squat figure disappeared in a cloud of smoke and flame. The wind was blowing strongly, and a great gust swept aside the curtain of fire, showing the broken and smashed window of the bedroom. The crowd saw Parsons swing himself along hand over hand, and get level with the window. He placed his knee on the sill and hurled himself into the room. As he disappeared a sob broke from the women below, but Alix sprang to her feet with an access of strength. "Father will save him—father will save him!" she cried, and clapped her hands in a frenzy of fear and delight. Then again came the roar and bellow of the flames.

The West Wing was now one fiery furnace of flame and black smoke, and the crackling and riving of the beams sounded loudly in the pauses of the wind. Men with buckets were bringing water, vainly endeavouring to put out the flames. The old well near the gate still had water in it, as Alix knew, and she ran towards this, calling to Tuckle, who hurried by with a bucket. "Get water from here," said Alix, and snatched at one of the buckets. In a moment she had dropped the bucket of the well, and was working furiously at the windlass. Tuckle, his face begrimed with smoke, assisted her eagerly, and the men swarmed around. But there was no sign of the doctor, or of the man he had gone to save.

While the buckets of the well rose and fell, and a chain of men was formed to carry the water towards the burning house, Alix, labouring like a heroine at the well, suddenly saw the head and shoulders of a man appear above the stonework. She beheld the white face of Gilbert Ainsleigh, who was trying to escape. With a sudden cry of terror at the unexpected sight she recoiled. Gilbert, seeing her startled face in the bright glare of the fire, and with his nerves unstrung, lost his grip of the stones and fell down the well with a lamentable cry. The men around had just caught a glimpse of him, and were hurrying forward in response to the cries of Alix, when a shout went up from those watching the house. Alix turned, and saw her father at the window lowering the unconscious form of Harold. He had tied the sheets together, and was lowering the sick man with a gigantic effort of strength. Alix ran forward to the terrace steps, and the men followed her, leaving Gilbert to his fate. Only Tuckle remained by the well, and he stared down into the blackness, hearing the vain cries of the man who was drowning at its bottom.

"Catch him—catch him!" cried Alix, running towards the steps. She saw that Parsons' strength was giving way, and that he could not hold out much longer. She forgot Gilbert, she forgot herself, she forgot everything but the one thing, that Harold would soon be in safety, and ran forward on to the terrace immediately under the window. The men also came, holding out their arms. They were just in time. The flames behind the doctor drove him over the sill, and he could no longer maintain his grip on the sheets. He let go with a cry of pain as his clothing caught on fire, and the unconscious form of Harold dropped from a considerable height into the outstretched arms of those waiting to receive him.

"LOWERING THE UNCONSCIOUS FORM OF HAROLD" (*p. 274*).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The next moment, with Alix holding his head, he was carried down the terrace steps and into safety. At the same moment Dr. Parsons tumbled, spread-eagle fashion, and with his clothes on fire, on to the stones of the terrace. Thomson ran up and, catching him in his arms, took him to where Harold was lying. At the same moment a rattle of wheels and a wild shout announced the arrival of the Helstone brigade. Alix gave one gasp and fainted.

When she came to herself she was lying in the drawing-room of the Grange, and beside her stood her father with his arm in a sling and his head bandaged. He still wore his burnt and blackened clothes.

"He is safe, dear. Don't trouble. The fire is being got under. Only the West Wing will be lost."

"And you are safe?"

"Yes. The ivy broke my fall. I have smashed my arm, and am rather bruised, but I am all right. Take this," and he held a glass of sedative to her lips.

The girl brushed it aside and arose, to fling her arms round his neck with warm affection. "Oh, father, father, forgive me—forgive me! What you have done can never, never be repaid! Oh, if—if—if——" then she fainted again. But this time she knew that Harold was safe, that her father had behaved like a hero, and so had redeemed the past, and that the Grange would not be burned to the ground. But what she did not know was that Gilbert Ainsleigh, in trying to escape from the house which he had fired, had fallen into his own trap, and was now lying a stark and stiff corpse on the lawn. Beside him Tuckle watched, as he had watched beside the corpse of the woman whom the dead man had so cruelly done to death.

A fortnight later and the young couple were in town, seated in Harold's chambers in Half Moon Street. Dr. Parsons had just left them to call on Mrs. Brady, who was prostrate from the shock of Gilbert's dreadful death. Alix also had been ill, after the terrible experience of the fire, and Harold had insisted upon taking her to London, so as to distract her thoughts. He had hobbled in some minutes before, and was laughing when he came forward to the chair where Alix was seated.

"What is it?" she asked smiling, for the colour was coming back to her cheeks, and the strength to her frame.

"I have just seen Sparrow, the detective, in the next room," said Harold, lying down on the sofa, and placing his crutch beside it. "He has been painfully and conscientiously searching out evidence so as to learn who killed Mrs. Ainsleigh. I have just informed him that he has arrived a day after the fair, and that we know who is guilty."

"What does he say?"

"Well, my dear," replied Youle, taking the soft white hand of his beloved, "he does not say much. He has learned that the costume of the monk was made for Mrs. Brady by a firm in the city, and traced it by the thin purple silk lining on the hood. I rather think that he intended to prove that Mrs. Brady killed Mrs. Ainsleigh out of jealousy, as he knows all about her love for the dead man. But I told him she had passed on the dress to Gilbert, and related everything. Sparrow was astonished and downcast at his failure. I could not give him the reward of a thousand pounds, as that has gone to Tuckle for the way in which he behaved over the fire, but I have written out a cheque which will satisfy him. Also,

I have promised to employ him again should we need his services."

Alix shuddered, and drew close to her lover. "I hope we'll have nothing more to do with detectives or murders," she said softly; "it has been a terrible time, dearest."

"It is all over now, darling," whispered Harold. "As soon as I can walk without this crutch we will be married. Your father is quite agreeable."

"Father has quite changed since the fire."

"He behaved like a hero," said Youle enthusiastically. "Then there's Tuckle. Who would have thought that the little scamp would have behaved so well? But for him many might have been burnt to death. He heard a noise made by Gilbert Ainsleigh when leaving my room, and rose to find out what it was. When the fire broke out in the secret passage, the boy wasted no time in lamentation, but rang the alarm bell. I think, my dear, he is quite worthy of the thousand pounds, in spite of his having acted as Ainsleigh's spy."

"I think Mr. Ainsleigh terrified him into submission.

"Hum!" said Harold doubtfully. "I don't know. Tuckle is born bad. However, now that he is to marry Julianna, who will be a wife and a mother in one, and can start his fish shop, he may, perhaps, mend."

"Has Julianna left Mrs. Bendeavour?"

"Not yet, but she will soon. Robert is ill now, and I don't think he will long survive his miserable brother. If he dies it will be a happy release for him, poor soul."

"And then Mrs. Bendeavour will marry Captain Rug."

"Alix!" Harold laughed loud and long.

"Didn't I tell you, dear? I have increased Captain Rug's pension, as he was not to blame in any way for the

death. He thanked me, and said that he would now be able to marry Mrs. Bendeavour. But what will his daughter say?" asked Alix, smiling.

"Oh, she is to marry Tony Brady, who got his mother to consent. Poor Mrs. Brady, she felt the death of Ainsleigh very deeply. However, I expect she has had a happy escape."

"How was it he died exactly, Harold?"

"You saw, my dear. He fired the faggots in the secret passage and then waited for a chance to escape. Owing to Tuckle's promptness, however, he could not get away unobserved rapidly. He tried to climb up the well from the secret passage, and fell into the water. It was a good thing that he died, as he would only have been hanged. But he is dead and buried, so we'll say nothing more about it. Luckily the police do not know the true facts."

"Why do you say luckily, Harold?"

"My darling," he replied seriously, "we know the truth about Mrs. Ainsleigh's death, but I have kept it from the police. It is no use making a scandal over the business. She is dead, and so is her miserable husband, so we can spare their names. You have the property, and we will marry soon, and look on the past as a bad dream."

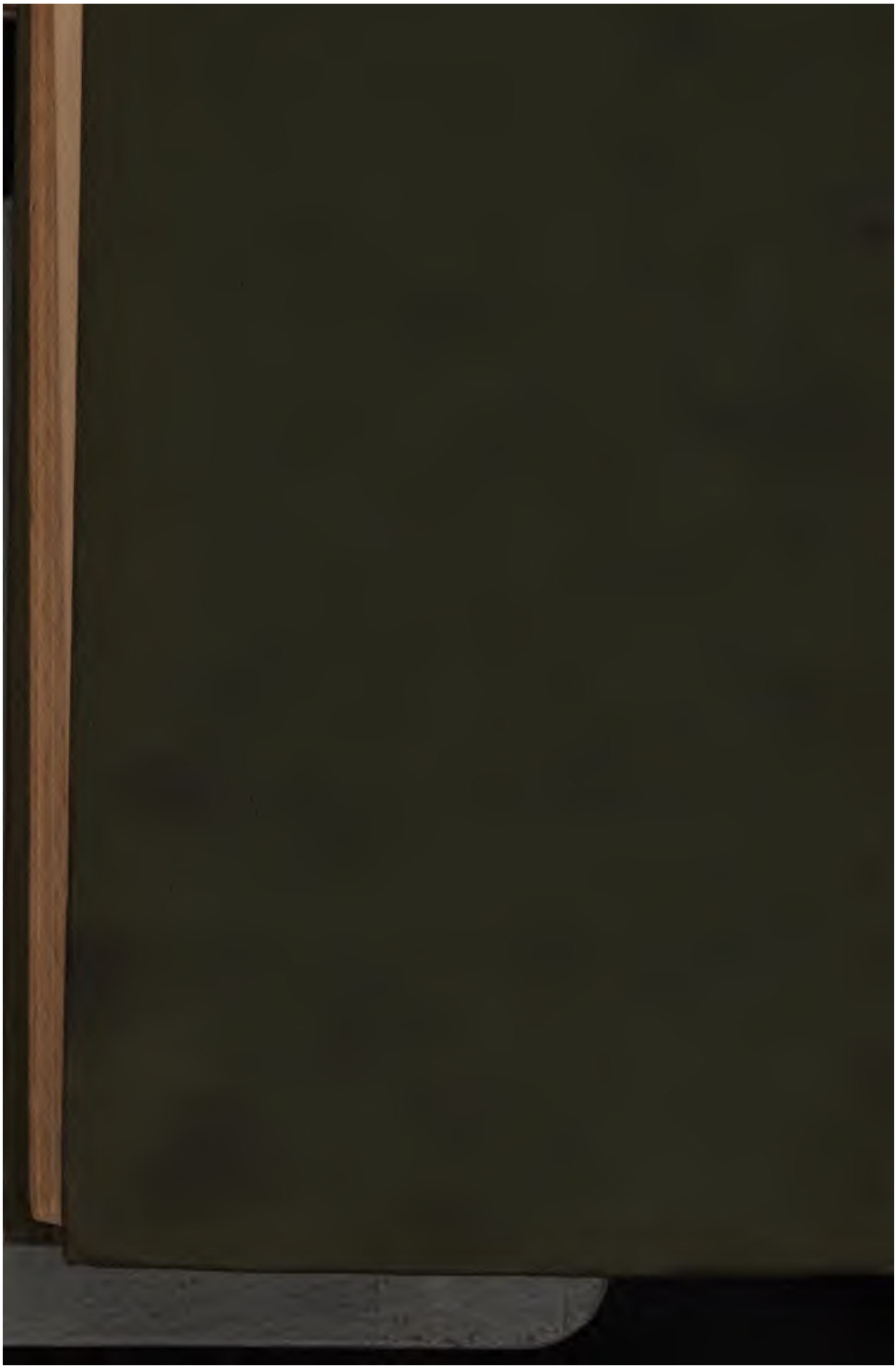
"And you will not go to South America, Harold?"

"Yes, my dear, I shall, and you will come with me. A change will do you good. Your father can look after the Grange in our absence. You will come, darling?"

"Harold"—Alix threw her arms round his neck—"I'll go to the end of the world with you."

"And that is where we are going, sweetheart. Let us put time and space between us and the Mystery of the Shadow."

A near clock chimed the hour of five. "It sounds like wedding bells," said Alix, laughing softly, and intensely happy.

"Ringing for the prettiest bride and the happiest bridegroom in the three kingdoms," whispered Youle, and he kissed her fondly.

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